

## Nymph, Witch, Sorceress, and Beyond: The Shifting Faces of Circe

Like her talents as a shape-shifter, Circe herself shifts over time as she is used and reused by authors from Homer to Petronius to fashion their narratives, sharpen their themes, and add resonance, depth, and complexity to their protagonists. But analysis of this diachronic reworking of the character of Circe and her place in these narratives reveals not just a series of changes to Homer's Circe, each suited to the particular work she is placed in. Rather, the transformation of the persona of Circe in post-Homeric literature gradually finds that persona diminished, reduced, and constricted, so that, in Petronius' *Satyricon*, her closest analogies in literature might be the degraded elite woman so vividly created in Catullus' Lesbia and Cicero's Clodia.

Homer's Circe (*Odys.* 10.212-541) is a goddess versed in magic, "the loveliest of all immortals" to Odysseus who, after releasing his men from her spell, remains with her for a year (Cohen. 1995). In Apollonius Rhodius (*Argon.* 4.559-591, 659-752) by contrast, Circe plays a supporting role as Medea's aunt, and a pale reflection of her sorceress/witch niece at that, since Medea does not transform her adversaries but rather destroys them. Even more in Latin epic, Vergil alludes to Circe in a nod to his Greek models (*Aen.* 7.10-20), but goes further than Apollonius not only by replacing her with another female protagonist who detains the hero, but also by essentially eliminating her from the narrative altogether (Quint. 2018). Ovid (*Met.* 13.966-14.71; 14.247-440), in keeping with his subject, revives Circe's transformative powers, but depicts her less as a seductive goddess than as a scorned woman, as she turns Scylla into a monster because Glaucus rejects Circe's amorous overtures in favor of Scylla (Rimell. 2006). Just as Circe admits in the *Metamorphoses* that she is helplessly attracted to men far beneath her in status (*Met.* 14.33-35; 372-376), so we see a similar creation in poetry and prose that

converges with this new image of the divine sorceress. Catullus' poems about his beloved Lesbia turn vengeful when she leaves him and he creates a woman who now enjoys fornicating with men high and low in places mean and sordid (e.g., 11, 37, 58; Greene. 1998). Cicero wins his case for Caelius by turning the elite Clodia into a virtual *meretrix*, a prostitute who cannot control her passions and will sell herself to any man for practically nothing (e.g., *Cael.* 50, 57). By the time we get to Petronius' *Satyrice*, we see a complete inversion and subversion of the Circe of Homer's epic (Rimell. 2002). Petronius' Circe, as opposed to her namesake, is "lovelier than any work of art," i.e., lovelier than an artificial, imitative form. She is further an all too mortal woman attracted not to heroes but rather to "the lowest of the low" in Encolpius' disguise as a slave (*Satyr.* 126).

The evolution of Circe, though perhaps extreme in her transformation from divine sorceress to degraded woman, tracks other attempts to control and contain dangerous women in Classical mythology and its real life counterpart, Greek/Roman women (Zimmerman. 2021).

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