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**Reimagining Circe: Subversion of Patriarchal Mythic Patterns  
in Louise Gluck's *Circe's Power***

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*Abstract*

Myths rooted in patriarchal ideologies subordinate women and distort female experiences. They are laden with stereotypes and gendered representations. This raised a significant concern among feminist scholars to critically challenge narratives entrenched in patriarchal thought and carve new mythological grounds for women. Feminist writers have employed revisionist mythmaking strategies to articulate dissent and denounce myths that annihilate their experiences. The paper examines the revisionist strategies employed by Louise Gluck in her poem *Circe's Power* (1996) from the collection *Meadowlands* (1996) using a feminist lens. The focus is on how Gluck reclaims and transforms the mythical landscape of the *Odyssey*, turning it into an empowered feminine space, thereby creating powerful connections between women and mythology. It pays close attention to the Greek character Circe from the *Odyssey* and explores how the poet appropriates her voice to subvert phallogocentric mythic models, critiquing social expectations and gender roles. The study's central focus is restoring Circe from the ruins of being trapped in her traditional archetypal role of the *femme fatale*.

**Keywords:** *Archetypes, Femme Fatale, Myths, Odyssey, Phallogocentrism*

## **Introduction**

Louise Elizabeth Gluck's poetry collection *Meadowlands* (1996) is a daring subversion of Homer's Greek epic *Odyssey*. In terms of structure, it is a free imitation of the classic tale with a revisionist take. A tactful reworking of the Greek narrative in which the poet traces the integration

of the poetic persona's marriage to that of the famous Odysseus and Penelope (Shehata 127). Gluck's revisionist approach also encompasses culturally marginalised figures, including Circe and the Sirens, giving voice and agency to these traditionally overlooked personas. In doing so, *Meadowlands* emerges as a polyphonic text that contrasts significantly with the original epic centered solely on Odysseus. This multi-layered approach presents an array of perspectives that challenge the monolithic and patriarchal discourses inherent in traditional storytelling. Polyphony subverts phallogentric discourses that privilege unity, identity and sameness and leave out multiplicity and difference.

This paper pays close attention to Louise Gluck's poem *Circe's Power* (1996) through the lens of revisionist mythmaking. The aim is to understand how the poet appropriates the mythological figure Circe to challenge and subvert patriarchal mythic models and critique gender roles and expectations. The following analysis sheds light on how the poet creates a powerful alternative discourse by rewriting a myth entrenched in phallogentric ideologies and displays resistance to patriarchal thinking. According to Alicia Ostriker, revisionist mythmaking in women's poetry offers significant ways to redefine themselves and, consequently, the male-dominated culture in which they reside (69). Through poetry, women poets create alternate symbols and images rooted in female experiences, thereby constructing a new symbolic that can reorganise the socio-cultural systems of patriarchy. Rereading or re-interpreting myths will help create alternate realities for women trapped inside detrimental images and symbols. Therefore, the central focus of the study lies in restoring Circe from the ruins of being trapped in the archetypal roles of the *femme fatale*.

### **Women and Mythology**

Jane Caputi accounts that throughout history, feminist writers have attempted to expose the patriarchal bias of mythographers and how symbols and paradigms represented through these myths maintain phallogentric reality (34). Phallogentric ideals propagate that the male sexual organ or the phallus is the central element of all social organisation, giving prominence to masculine thinking. Therefore, myths rooted in phallogentric ideologies are encoded with male privilege, denying women access to authoritative expression. This raised a significant concern among feminist scholars to challenge patriarchal mythic models and carve new mythological grounds for women. It is important to note that "most mythopoeia conducted by women and some men is feminist, contributing to the struggle against gender oppression" (Murphy 27). For Ostriker,

Mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a female writer. There we find the conquering gods and heroes, the deities of pure thought and spirituality so superior to mother nature; there we find the sexually wicked Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve, and the virtually passive Iphigenia, Alcestis, Mary, Cinderella, It is thanks to myths that we believe a woman must be "angel" or "monster." (71)

Therefore, the core of revisionist mythmaking for the woman poet is to correct the gender stereotypes encoded in mythological narratives. It challenges the persistent efforts of male-dominated institutions to fortify and perpetuate their dominance. For example, the language and symbols employed in Greek myths and epics have functioned as hegemonic discourses to constantly create unequal power structures that maintain women's inferior status. For example, a feminist analysis of Homer's *Odyssey* reveals that his female characters broadly fall under two archetypal categories. The first consists of passive women who serve the ideological constructs of patriarchy. They do not threaten this convenient establishment but strengthen it by conforming. For example, Penelope, Odysseus's wife, readily falls into this category as she represents the quintessential wife- subservient, generous, and compassionate.

In comparison, Women in the second category disrupt the foundations of patriarchy. They challenge phallogocentric establishments, are vocal, lead men astray, and are outcasts. In literature, eliminating these women served the symbolic purpose of destroying female power and agency.

Susan R Bowers writes:

Medusa and women like her, not owned by patriarchy, are ideal victims. Destroying them does not challenge male property rights and does not damage those women who serve a patriarchal society. The sacrifice of Medusa women enabled the male communal expression of anger and violence that female Eros and power provoke. Whereas Medusa's slaughter is symbolic, and no actual blood is spilt, the impact of her symbolic murder is profound for both women and men since it demonstrates the attempted destruction of real female power (225).

In the *Odyssey*, after Odysseus's departure, Calypso commits suicide, struck with grief and unrequited love. Similarly, in Greek mythology, myths and stories about the deadliest females, including Medusa, Circe, Calypso, and Medea, culminate in either misery or destruction. Similarly, Penelope and Circe stand at polarities in Homer's version of the *Odyssey*. Penelope represents the archetypal qualities of a dutiful, loyal, submissive wife and a nurturing mother, and Circe represents a vile, jealous predator. They constitute opposing forces and display attributes that male-dominated cultures expect them to.

This dichotomy reinforces the misleading notion that women can be broadly categorised into two stereotypical archetypal categories -the 'Angel in the House' and 'The Femme Fatale.'. These two archetypes represent different cultural attitudes towards women and the varied representations of the societal construct termed femininity. Gluck's Circe poems primarily aim to dismantle the femme fatale archetypal image ascribed to Circe. Archetypes lack fluidity and exist on a sacred plane; therefore, they "tend to sanctify and make rigid the ritual behaviour and the understanding of the way things are" (Meadow 1992). This rigidity in encapsulating human experiences gave rise to several stereotypes, patterns, and modes of behaviour that are detrimental to women. Revisionist mythmaking is an effective antidote, and women's revisionist writings operate on the thought that one cannot contain women's multiple and diverse experiences within archetypal confinements.

### **Rewriting the Femme Fatale Archetype in *Circe's Power***

Circe originates from ancient Greek mythology, with numerous references to the goddess. This paper uses Barry. B. Powell's rendition of the *Odyssey* (2014) as a reference. In Powell's translation, Circe is the one with the 'fine tresses' (128), a 'dread goddess' (129), and a 'connoisseur of drugs' (263). She is the offspring of Helios and Perse, the deity of the Sun and the Ocean nymph. Endowed with the ability to wield the forces of nature, she has curative powers and extensive knowledge of medicine, rituals and necromancy. Circe is also infamous for her ability to seduce, entrap and transform men into swine. When Odysseus and his crew land on Aeaëa, Circe lures them into her palace with hospitality and uses her potent magic to transform the men into animals. Guided by the god Hermes, Odysseus manages to resist her enchantments and compels Circe to undo the transformation. Circe's character is emblematic of the femme fatale archetype and represents man's simultaneous fear and desire for women who do not conform to patriarchal standards.

The 'Femme Fatale' archetype refers to sexually alluring women who corrupt and lead men astray. This erotic icon, with attributes of animalistic sexuality and controlling nature, is still widely used and circulated in literature, cinema and popular culture. For Mary Ann Doann, the femme fatale is a figure of "certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma, for her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be" (5). There is a sense of uncertainty and enigma that encompasses this archetypal image. This mystery and uncertainty surrounding the figure raised the fear of the unknown and provided a space for several assumptions. The femme fatale's alluring physical appearance makes her an object of desire and

masks her motivation and evil intentions. For decades, the archetype reflected the desires and fantasies of the men who created them. However, many feminist works, particularly in the 1970s, identified a specific “resistance” in the figure, which has been picked up as a mode of feminist agency.

Gluck’s poem *Circe’s Power* actively aligns with the feminist works that attribute a mode of resistance to the character Circe. The poet attempts to liberate Circe from the negative stereotypes and assumptions typically associated with the femme fatale archetype. The poem repositions Circe, offering a reinterpretation that challenges and liberates her from the confines of traditional portrayals, thereby empowering her character beyond conventional limitations. However, Gluck’s retelling does not result in demythologising Circe. The poet retains Circe’s mythical elements to present an alternate myth rather than seeking to discard the original tale in its entirety. Therefore, these retellings eliminate the flaws of the previous versions. According to Lauter, the only means to dislodge a myth is to replace it with a less harmful one. For instance, Gluck’s Circe is accomplished, brave and beautiful. Recognising and celebrating these qualities differentiate *Circe’s Power* from the other tales about the enchantress. Firstly, the poet acknowledges Circe’s immense power, but her administration does not destroy men. The downfall of the men resulted from their demonic appetites rather than being the consequence of Circe’s intervention. This creates an alternate image of Circe and slowly removes her from the entrapment of the femme fatale archetype. Gluck writes:

*I never turned anyone into a pig  
some people are pigs; I make them  
look like pigs (Gluck 338).*

Circe assumes the narrative voice in the poem, directing the lines towards an unknown addressee. The poem’s tone resembles a rebuttal that parallels the famous essay *A Defence of Circe* by Katherine Ann Porter. Porter posits the contention that Circe played no role in the metamorphosis of the men who arrived on her island. Their inherent bestiality was exposed with Circe’s “wand of the transforming truth” (46). Porter’s essay reframes Circe as a symbol of strength and autonomy and advocates for a critical reassessment of Circe’s portrayal. The essay aims to reimagine and substitute derogatory images associated with Circe with positive ones, thereby initiating a paradigm shift. However, this comes with the cost that the implicit ideology embedded within these myths cannot be entirely eradicated. They can only be supplanted with a conceivably less

harmful one. Therefore, a neutral discourse devoid of an ideology is a myth and one that claims objectivity is necessarily masculine (Cixous 876). Gluck carefully replaces Circe's tale with a less harmful one, opening the possibility of revision. To her, Circe played no role in transforming the men into animals. The inherent bestiality was present in them all along. Circe's innocence entangles her from the conventions of the femme fatale archetype and transforms her portrayal from a temptress who traps men to a goddess who unveils the truth.

The first few lines reveal Circe's innocence and truth, whereas the next few reveal her insatiable power. Mythical narratives rooted in masculine-centric thought contribute to a conscious suppression of women's recognition and realisation of their innate power and agency. They depict instances, narratives and images where women who exercised their power faced catastrophic ends. These detrimental images contained in patriarchal myths present themselves as universal and justify the alienation and exploitation of women. Therefore, women's writing is a tool to subvert and exhume implicit ideologies contained in myths which are otherwise innocently consumed. Gluck's disruption of the mainstream cultural associations of Circe is alleviated further in the following lines.

*Under the care of  
me and my ladies, they  
sweetened right up.*

*Then I reversed the spell,  
showing you my goodness  
as well as my power (Gluck 338).*

Powerful women do not fit into the conventional boundaries of womanhood. For instance, In the *Odyssey*, figures like Circe, Calypso and the Sirens challenge prevailing phallogocentric establishments, vociferously articulate their desires, lure men astray and exist as societal outcasts within the thematic framework of the epic. Eliminating these women served the symbolic purpose of destroying female power and agency. This instilled fear in the female consumers of these myths, inhibiting them from exploring the depths of their potential. Women holding positions of power threatened the smooth functioning of patriarchal structures and were, therefore, conditioned to refrain from exploring them. The above lines reveal Circe's incredible power as well as her goodness. Gluck's Circe did not turn the men into animals but transformed them into humans. The above lines celebrate Circe's constrained and hidden power.

According to Cixous, men have entangled us within the grip of two horrifying myths- the tale of Medusa and the Abyss (Cixous 883). These two powerful and oppressive myths constrained women from accessing their strength and reaching the full realisation of their potential. The Medusa myth depicts women as terrifying, reinforcing the idea that women are to be feared and controlled. However, according to Cixous, Medusa was feared for her power to kill and terrify those who dared to confront her. Similarly, the myth of the abyss symbolises a vast and bottomless chasm that is too dark and dangerous to be explored. This is a patriarchal strategy to deter women from further exploring their cultural and psychological depth. Parallel to Cixous's treatment of Medusa, Gluck attempts to reveal Circe's cultural and psychological depth through her poem. Gluck's portrayal foregrounds Circe's capacity for insight and highlights her qualities of goodness, charm and power. Gluck writes:

*I foresaw your departure  
your men with my help braving  
the crying and the pounding sea; you think  
a few tears upset me? My friend  
every sorceress is  
a pragmatist at heart (Gluck 338).*

Circe was aware that Odysseus and his men, with her aid, would brave the raging sea, leaving her in a state of emotional desolation. However, Circe claims that every sorceress is a pragmatist at heart. A pragmatist entails a rational disposition and is not readily swayed by emotions. Despite the hurt inflicted on Circe, she exhibited foresight and remained a pragmatist, making her rational, practical and parallelly sensitive, and affectionate. When viewed through the lens of patriarchy, these attributes do not align. There exists a hierarchical dichotomy where emotional capacity is ranked inferior to rationality. Narratives centered on masculine thought operate on this logic of sexual opposition. This opposition creates extremities and establishes hierarchies. For instance, 'culture/nature', 'mind/ body', and 'man/woman', and in all these cases, the former dominates the latter. Gluck's deliberate subversion of binary norms becomes discernible in her portrayal of Circe, wherein she adeptly synthesises elements of sensuality and rationality. Oppositional binaries constructed by patriarchal ideologies contributed to the 'othering' of women for centuries and resulted in the formation of archetypes, including the femme fatale and Angel in the house. For instance, the concept of the 'angel in the house' mirrored Victorian ideals of domesticity, celebrating women who conformed to its rigid frameworks.

The image was of a perfect wife and mother-devoted, pious, virtuous, loyal and self-sacrificing. It diminished women into irrational beings, requiring male governance and intervention. The static idea of women being the guardians of a home's sanctity and the primary caretakers resulted in several images of the all-sacrificing Angel. Through several discourses, this unrealistic, glorified image surpassed time and geographical space. It perfected itself into an archetype, finding a place in the collective consciousness. Later, several writers attempted to destroy this widely accepted archetypal as it severely harmed women who did not corroborate with such standards. For example, in her essay "Professions for Women", Virginia Woolf declares that "killing this angel in the house was part of the occupation of the women writer" (237). The idea of a woman who existed to serve, flatter and soothe the male half of the population was harmful to younger generations of readers. In *Odyssey*, Penelope reflects this image, and Circe stands in sharp contrast. However, Gluck's poem on Circe blurs these sharp distinctions. Circe's multifaceted nature, evident throughout her works, proves that these diverse attributes coexist and are not mutually exclusive. The poem reaches its culmination in the following lines:

*If I wanted to hold you  
I could hold you prisoner (Gluck 338).*

Gluck's innovative reinterpretation of the Circe myth is at its utmost intensity when Circe claims that she has the power and the ability to hold Odysseus prisoner against his will. However, rather than exercising this authority, she elects to liberate him. This strategic deviation from the original tale is a deliberate subversion where the poet introduces an interplay of power and benevolence. Gluck's Circe is cunning but not deceitful. Her affection for Odysseus did not stem from future intentions of deceit or betrayal. Circe was benevolent to Odysseus, and her affection did not stem from future intentions of deceit or betrayal. In "Transformations of Circe: The History of the Enchantress", Judith Yarnall discusses how Circe never lied to Odysseus. She does not threaten him with bodily harm and impotence, "Odysseus is one of the very few men in myth or literature who mingles sexually with an immortal goddess and does not later suffer for his presumption" (14). Unlike the witch Calypso in *Odyssey*, Gluck's Circe does not display the slightest trace of possession but willingly lets him depart to Ithaca.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe is not mentioned as the demonic witch once she surrenders to Odysseus. Homer's dread goddess becomes the 'Lovely Circe' (Bowell 110) and is filled with feelings of pity and benevolence. Her surrender to Odysseus and fulfillment of her sexual desires were sufficient



for Circe's transformation from the femme fatale archetype to a good, benevolent woman. In contrast, Gluck's Circe possesses these qualities all along. She did not need to surrender to Odysseus to transform into the lovely Circe. She is powerful, kind, sensual, rational, emotional, practical, cunning, and benevolent. She reflects on women's multifaceted existence and the proof that rigid archetypal categories constructed by men cannot contain them.

### **Conclusion**

Louise Gluck's *Circe's Power* is a daring subversion of the stereotypical positioning of women in mythologies. By attempting a fresh reading of the Circe myth in *Odyssey*, she reveals her concerns with the patriarchal, phallogocentric construction of myths and discards conventional archetypal associations of mythological women. *Circe's Power* reads as a defence for Circe. In addition to highlighting her insatiable power, rationality and intellect, the poem also foregrounds her benevolence and truth. The poems, when read through the lens of feminist revisionist mythmaking, redefine women's relationships to Western mythology. It is a celebration of female power, creativity, will and agency. By disrupting and subverting phallogocentric modes of oppression, the poems are accurate examples of understanding and teaching the concepts of revisionist writing. For Cixous, "writing is precisely the possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879). Gluck's Poems on Circe has the potential to critique dominant systems of representation and initiate a space for the articulation of the female consciousness untainted by the male culture. The poems detach Circe from the clutches of static archetypes and bring to light the multiplicities contained within them. This poem is a backlash to centuries of patriarchal representations of women in Greek mythology. These interventions are very much required to nudge women away from mythic structures that govern their lives. *Meadowlands* urges women to be aware of their uniqueness and the need to move away from patriarchal stereotypes. The poem makes a clarinet call to women to explore themselves and find their authentic places in the world.

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