

HOW CULTURE AFFECTS CHARACTERISATION: A RECEPTION STUDY OF CIRCE IN *EPIC: THE MUSICAL*

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Epic: The Musical is a modern reimagining of Homer's *Odyssey* in which the character of Circe is reframed. In the *Odyssey*, Circe is depicted as a magically and sexually dangerous adversary of Odysseus. In the musical, Circe's narrative role is more complex, and her perspective is included to shed light on her actions. Further, while Circe and Odysseus have sexual intercourse in the *Odyssey*, they do not in the musical. The significance of these changes is investigated by analysing the cultural norms and social morality which underlie the respective portrayals of Circe in the *Odyssey* and in the musical.

Keywords: Circe; Homer's *Odyssey*; *Epic: The Musical*; reception studies; gender.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Puerto Rican composer and playwright Jorge Rivera-Herrans released a series of songs on various social media platforms which comprise *Epic: The Musical*.¹ The musical is a retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* inspired by elements of musical theatre, anime, and video games, which reimagines Homer's epic as a nine-part album chronicling Odysseus' tumultuous journey back home to Ithaca.² In adapting the *Odyssey* to create the musical, Rivera-Herrans made various changes from the source material. One such key change is the musical's reframing of Odysseus and Circe's intimate interaction. While Circe and Odysseus have sexual intercourse in the *Odyssey* (Hom. *Od.* 10.347), Odysseus turns down Circe's attempt at seduction in the musical.³ Furthermore, while

¹ Caudle (2024) explains how the musical was initially released primarily on TikTok, and then on Spotify and YouTube Music as well, growing popular to such an extent that it even spawned the creation of a number of animated fan videos ('animatics') inspired by the songs and lyrics.

² Harter (2025) notes that *Epic: The Musical*, since it is a concept musical, has never been performed live. Instead, it was released entirely on social media, where it quickly went viral. Analysing the impact of the social media sphere on the reception of the musical presents a fascinating opportunity for potential further study, though beyond the scope of this essay.

³ Rivera-Herrans 2024e; the citation refers to the song *There are other ways* from *Epic: The Musical*. All songs referred to in this essay are listed in the bibliography.

Odysseus stays on Circe's island Aeaea for a year in the *Odyssey* (Hom. *Od.* 10.467), in the musical he only remains with her for a day (Rivera-Herrans 2024e). At first glance, these changes may seem relatively minor – especially since the act Circe is most infamous for, that of transforming Odysseus' men into pigs, remains the same in both *Odyssey* and musical. However, in this essay, I will show that Rivera-Herrans' changes have far more significant consequences, especially regarding the narrative role Circe plays in the respective media. For this essay, 'narrative role' is defined as the purpose or function of a character in the narrative.

I will begin by exploring in detail the narrative role that Circe plays in Homer's *Odyssey*, with reference to the cultural norms and morality underlying her portrayal. Then I will move on to an analysis of Circe's narrative role in *Epic: The Musical* and how it differs from her role in the *Odyssey*. I will examine the modern cultural context and morality that underscores this reinterpretation of Circe, with the aim of showing that social attitudes toward the representation of women in narrative and the importance of fidelity in marriage have undergone a significant change from ancient times.

While there have been many studies on the interplay between fanfiction and the Classics,⁴ as well as reception studies of published novels that draw from Classical or mythological sources,⁵ I have encountered far fewer reception studies of musicals. Furthermore, *Epic: The Musical* is a very new concept musical: it was only officially completed in December 2024.⁶ Therefore, there has been little to no opportunity for reception studies to be conducted yet. Thus, this essay aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by analysing the reception of a new, myth-inspired musical.⁷

⁴ Among others, see González (2025), a reception study of the portrayal of Persephone in fanfiction. The Netherlands Research School for Literary Studies (OSL) also held a conference in 2024 titled 'Fanfiction and the ancient world.' Thus, reception studies of fanfiction are becoming increasingly popular in the field of Classics.

⁵ Among others, see Spacciante (2024), a reception study of Madeline Miller's novel *Circe*.

⁶ The final 'saga' of the nine-part concept album was officially released to music streaming services on 25 December 2024.

⁷ The theoretical framework underlying this essay is that of reception studies: looking at modern interpretations of ancient myths or characters in order to glean new insights into ancient texts and their contexts, as well as their modern situations (Hardwick 2003:2). While reception studies have sometimes been criticised for only analysing modern society and not providing any new insights into ancient texts and contexts, scholars such as Hardwick argue that reception studies also refocus academic attention back to the original ancient myths and texts and can prompt new questions and research possibilities (Hardwick 2003:4). Therefore, reception studies contribute significantly to creating a dialogue between the Classical past and the present.

The role of Circe in the Odyssey

Foley (2005:106) explains that the roles of women in ancient epic are varied, but one of the most common roles is the ‘blocker’ or obstacle woman. This is a woman who distracts the hero from his quest or obstructs him from achieving his ultimate goal. Circe in the *Odyssey* is a prime example of a woman in this role. When she is introduced in Book 10 of the *Odyssey*, her first major act is to transform Odysseus’ men into pigs by offering them food and wine laced with magical herbs (Hom. *Od.* 10.237–240).⁸ This act immediately casts her as an obstacle for Odysseus, as he is now required to retrieve his men before he can continue with his journey. Furthermore, the god Hermes makes it clear to Odysseus that Circe could easily subject him to the same fate (Hom. *Od.* 10.285), and therefore she is a powerful threat to Odysseus and to his ultimate goal, which is returning home to Ithaca.

With Hermes’ assistance, Odysseus is able to resist Circe’s transforming drugs (Hom. *Od.* 10.301–305). Yet this is only the first impediment that Circe offers: after failing to turn him into a pig, she immediately invites Odysseus into her bed to have sexual intercourse (Hom. *Od.* 10.333–335). Odysseus’ response to Circe’s offer is as immediate as it is telling: he exclaims, ‘You want me to go up into your chamber and your bed, so that when you have me naked you can weaken and unman me?’ (Hom. *Od.* 10.339–341).⁹ Several lines earlier, Hermes warned Odysseus with very similar phrasing not to sleep with Circe before she has sworn him a great oath not to harm him, lest she ‘unman’ him (Hom. *Od.* 10.299–301). These lines are indicative of Circe’s dangerous sexuality (McClymont 2012:22). Thus, Circe is not only a magically threatening figure, but also a sexually threatening one.

This threat, too, is overcome when Odysseus obtains an oath from Circe not to harm him any further (Hom. *Od.* 10.342–345). Yet Circe still acts as a blocker to Odysseus and to his quest in a more subtle way: through her generous hospitality and care, she keeps Odysseus and his men on her island for a full year (Hom. *Od.* 10.467). Essentially, she successfully seduces Odysseus not only with physical pleasure, but also with the pleasures of a comfortable home, good food and good wine (Hom. *Od.* 10.450–465). Circe’s seduction in this manner is so successful that Odysseus seemingly forgets about his quest entirely: after a year on Aeaëa, he is

⁸ There is some academic debate about whether Circe’s transformative magic is witchcraft or not, and further, whether Circe herself is a witch or a goddess. For some compelling arguments on this question, see McClymont 2012:21–26, who outlines both sides of the argument, and Gregory 2022:49, who argues that Circe is a goddess rather than a witch. However, this debate is beyond the scope of this essay, as is the complex differentiation between ancient magic and religion.

⁹ All translations of the *Odyssey* are from Green 2018.

only spurred into action when his men ask him ‘Are you out of your mind? High time to think of your homeland if it’s truly your destiny to be saved’ (Hom. *Od.* 10.472–473). These lines show that, although Circe did not directly enchant Odysseus, she was nevertheless able to make him forget about his quest and his homeland, thereby risking everlasting obscurity. This is particularly significant when one considers Odysseus’ status as a Homeric hero, to whom not being honoured in memory and song is a form of symbolic death (Foley 2005:107). Circe the seductress therefore tempts Odysseus away from both his quest and from his identity and values as a Homeric hero (Foley 2005:107; Slatkin 2005:323). While Circe does ultimately end up helping Odysseus on his journey home, her primary role in the *Odyssey* is clearly that of the magically and sexually dangerous ‘blocker’ woman.

Cultural norms and morality underlying Circe’s portrayal in the Odyssey

According to Lamberton (2005:165), the cultural factors behind the portrayal of Circe in the *Odyssey* include, *inter alia*, the fact that the epic was created to educate and entertain – the latter pertaining to audiences’ emotions and imaginations. With regard to characterisation, entertainment as a goal often leads to exaggerated character traits and archetypes, which better enable audiences to understand and follow the plot, and to immerse themselves fully in the epic’s narrative world. The result is an exaggerated portrayal of Circe’s character as a woman who is both magically and sexually dangerous.

Second, ancient epic aimed at, and indeed succeeded in, playing a notable role in ancient Greek education. Homer’s epics were not only used to teach reading and writing in ancient Greece but also to convey the accepted social order of the time in order to produce the desired character traits in young people (Lamberton 2005:166–167). In terms of its portrayal of women, the *Odyssey* glorifies Penelope as the seminal example of the faithful, chaste wife who looks after her husband’s household in his absence (Brilliant 1995:167; Foley 2005:111). In contrast, a woman like Circe, unmarried and with sexual agency, is represented as dangerous to men. Since she is not under the control of any man, she has the potential to place a man under *her* control and to ‘unman’ him (Foley 2005:107). If Penelope represents the ideal, then Circe is a counter-ideal, an example of what ancient Greek women must not be.

Odysseus and Circe’s intimate interaction reflects the one-sided sexual morality of the time. Odysseus is allowed and almost expected to have sexual intercourse with Circe despite the fact that he is already married to Penelope. Odysseus’ only concern before he engages in sexual intercourse with Circe is that she might harm him (Hom. *Od.* 10.299). At no point does he express any concern

over the fact that sleeping with Circe would mean being unfaithful to Penelope. Yet Penelope, and by extension all 'proper' women in ancient Greek society, are expected to be unfalteringly loyal to their husbands (Foley 2005:107).

Finally, it must be noted that the *Odyssey* is told from Odysseus' point of view – a male perspective which caters to a primarily male audience (see Schein 1995:19). The portrayal of Circe is thus biased, as she is depicted solely through the eyes of Odysseus and never allowed to make her own perspective clear to the audience (Schein 1995:19). Furthermore, while Circe's primary role is that of the obstacle or 'blocker' woman, she is eventually overcome by Odysseus and helps him proceed with his quest. Rodax (1971:582) and Yarnall (1994:21) argue that Circe transforms from dangerous antagonist to ally due to Odysseus asserting his masculinity over her when he threatens her with his sword. Thus, Circe shows that even a sexually dangerous woman capable of using magic can be overcome by the power of masculinity, which boosts Odysseus' own sense of power within the narrative and caters to the male audience's beliefs about male power and superiority (Schein 1995:19).

The role of Circe in Epic: The Musical

Circe in *Epic: The Musical* plays a very different narrative role from her Homeric counterpart, and one that is somewhat more difficult to delineate. If her primary role in the musical was to be an obstacle to Odysseus, then she would not be a very effective one: while she does transform Odysseus' men into pigs and attempts to do the same to Odysseus (Rivera-Herrans 2024d), she turns his men back and lets them all go within a single day (Rivera-Herrans 2024e). Furthermore, while Circe attempts to seduce Odysseus, her attempt does not delay or distract him from his quest for any significant amount of time.

Perhaps the most striking change the musical makes from its Homeric source material is the fact that Odysseus turns down Circe's attempted seduction. As in the Homeric epic, Circe fails to transform Odysseus into a pig, because he has eaten a plant called moly, given to him by Hermes, that renders her magic useless (Rivera-Herrans 2024g). Instead of losing her composure, Circe seductively sings to Odysseus that 'there are other ways of persuasion, there are other modes of control... there are other actions of passion' (Rivera-Herrans 2024e). While Odysseus seems tempted for a moment, he eventually pulls away from Circe because he is deeply in love with and faithful to his wife Penelope, whom he describes as 'my everything, my Penelope' (Rivera-Herrans 2024e). Circe is moved by Odysseus' clear love for and loyalty to his wife, to the point that she decides to help him after all (Rivera-Herrans 2024e).

Instead of being overcome by Odysseus' masculine power as in the *Odyssey*, Circe in the musical changes from an antagonist to Odysseus' ally because she is touched by his love for his wife. She decides that these qualities make him worthy of her trust and resolves to free his men and to help them all onto the next phase of their journey (Rivera-Herrans 2024e). It could be argued, therefore, that a part of Circe's role in *Epic* is to show the audience how Odysseus' positive character traits, like his enduring love for Penelope, contribute toward his heroic nature, and how faithfulness can win you friends.

Yet this is not the entirety of the role Circe plays in the musical. Unlike in the *Odyssey*, the musical allows the audience to hear Circe's perspective and not only Odysseus'. Right before she tries to seduce Odysseus, Circe explains to the audience that

...my nymphs are like my daughters, I protect them at all costs.
The last time we let strangers live, we faced a heavy loss.
You've given me no reason to bestow you with my trust,
but everyone's true colours are revealed in acts of lust' (Rivera-Herrans 2024b).

These lyrics imply that Circe and the nymphs who live with her have encountered men on the island before, and these men assaulted and possibly killed some of them. This is another diversion from the epic source material by Rivera-Herrans, because while there is a brief mention of nymphs living on Circe's island in Homer's *Odyssey* (Hom. *Od.* 10.348–351) there is no indication that Circe acts maternally towards them, nor that these nymphs (or indeed Circe herself) have been harmed by men before. Thus, this addition is an innovation by Rivera-Herrans to add depth to Circe's character and attempt to explain her motives to the audience. The addition suggests that Circe's transformation of Odysseus' men into pigs is driven by a desire to protect her nymphs and herself from being hurt by men again.

When it comes to Odysseus himself, since her magic has been rendered ineffective against him, she resorts to the only other weapon in her arsenal: her sexuality (Rivera-Herrans 2024e). She tries to seduce Odysseus as another way to put him under her control and eliminate the threat to herself and her nymphs. This motivation ties into a broader theme in the musical: the idea that 'ruthlessness is mercy upon ourselves' (Rivera-Herrans 2024f). That is, in an unkind world, it is sometimes necessary to act harshly or ruthlessly to protect yourself. Circe acts ruthlessly by being willing to sacrifice herself and her body to ensure that Odysseus is subjected to her control in one way or another.

One 'saga' later in the musical, Odysseus reflects back on Circe and finally realises why she acted the way she did:

...when the witch turns men to pigs to protect her nymphs,
 is she going insane?
 Or did she learn to be colder when she got older
 and now she saves them the pain? (Rivera-Herrans 2024c)

These lines confirm that Circe's actions are proactive and driven by the desire to protect her nymphs, who are like children to her, from suffering at the hands of men again. Therefore, I argue that Circe's role in the musical, instead of being merely another obstacle Odysseus has to face on his journey, is more complex. She functions as a narrative device to develop the broader theme in the musical that being ruthless towards others may sometimes be the only way to protect yourself and your loved ones.

Cultural norms and morality underlying Circe's portrayal in Epic: The Musical

The cultural norms behind the portrayal of Circe in *Epic: The Musical* are those of twenty-first-century America, which are significantly different from ancient times. First and foremost, as Sadgrove (1993:58) observes, the sexual morality of society is different. In the United States of America, societal views on sexual morality have been shaped by Christian morality. Christian morality emphasises monogamy and faithfulness to one's spouse, while adultery is prohibited in the Bible and therefore seen as morally unacceptable (Colman 1993:77; Sadgrove 1993:70). Even more liberal states which reject other Christian moral concepts like avoiding premarital sex, have a very strong emphasis on fidelity (Sadgrove 1993:58). Thus, instead of glorifying *only* loyal wives, modern media tends to idealise relationships where both parties to the marriage are faithful to each other (Colman 1993:76). While Rivera-Herrans himself has never explicitly stated whether he is religious or not, he grew up in Puerto Rico, an American territory with a strong Christian tradition, then studied in Indiana and currently resides in California.¹⁰ It is therefore reasonable to assume a strong influence from pervading Christian social norms, particularly with regards to sexual morality and fidelity. This is demonstrated by the musical's reframing of Odysseus as a loyal husband to Penelope, a change likely made to ensure that the central protagonist of the musical conformed to contemporary social norms. Furthermore, it is Odysseus' fidelity that makes Circe decide he is worthy of both her trust and her help, implying that, if Odysseus had let Circe seduce him, she would not have helped him at all.

Twentieth-century feminism, which influenced ideas on women's agency and social roles, also impacted on Circe's modern portrayal. While the entire social organisation of ancient Greece revolved around men and male power, with

¹⁰ Puerto Rican Report, 5 May 2024.

women's primary roles being those of wife and mother, this is no longer the case (Foley 2005:105). Harris (2004:6) describes how the 'feminist push' broke down the barriers to women's education and inclusion in the workplace, allowing them entry into the public sphere instead of being confined to the private, domestic sphere. The success of these feminist endeavours led to the social construction of an entirely different identity for women in the twenty-first century, one where a successful woman is defined by her independence, resilience, flexibility and self-sufficiency (Harris 2004:100). It is safe to assume that the creator of the musical was influenced by such a construction of female identity when creating the character of Circe. Indeed, Circe in *Epic* is clearly independent and self-sufficient, since she magically runs her own island. She is also very resilient, able and willing to protect herself and her nymphs from the threats men pose to them. None of these aspects of her character are portrayed negatively, as they are in the *Odyssey*, where Circe is seen as a dangerous example of unchecked female power (Brilliant 1995:167; Foley 2005:111). With Circe's independence and power, the musical shows to its twentieth-century audience that she is a successful, powerful woman.

Further crucial context underlying Circe's portrayal in *Epic* is its creator's stated inspirations. Rivera-Herrans has noted that he was influenced by elements of musical theatre and video games when creating the musical.¹¹ Twenty-first-century musical theatre is known for often centring female characters and female experiences.¹² *Epic* clearly draws inspiration from this legacy, since it gives Circe a voice of her own instead of merely telling her story from Odysseus' point of view. The musical also makes an effort to add depth to her character and expand on her motivations, which is possibly due to the creator's video game inspiration. According to Crispin (2025), video games are known for providing 'lore', which is the history of the video game world and its characters to give the player more context about the game. It is also a convention of the genre to give characters, often those who are typically the antagonist figures, a 'backstory' or personal history to explain their actions (Crispin 2025). Thus, Rivera-Herrans' addition of detail about Circe's past and her relationship with her nymphs could be a result of the way he drew inspiration from video games when creating the musical. I therefore conclude that the reinterpretation of Circe in *Epic: The Musical* reflects how social contexts and pervading influences on characterisation have changed significantly since ancient times.

¹¹ See Harter 2025.

¹² Broadway Inbound (2024) discusses how in the twenty-first century, female characters are no longer relegated to only playing supporting roles in musicals. Instead, popular musicals such as, *inter alia*, *Wicked* and *Six* have presented women as the central figures.

Conclusion

When analysing the role any character plays in a narrative, it is crucial to consider the social and cultural context of both author and audience. This is because narratives and the roles of female characters in particular reflect the norms and morals of the societies that create those narratives. Circe in Homer's *Odyssey* plays the role of the dangerous obstacle woman: she is both magically and sexually threatening towards the hero Odysseus, even though she submits to Odysseus' masculine power. This underscores the point that the *Odyssey* is an epic designed to glorify a man and male power. In contrast, the role of Circe in the musical is more complex, as she shows how women are vulnerable to being hurt by men, and how such hurt may cause them to act in seemingly merciless ways to protect themselves and their loved ones. This modern reinterpretation of Circe highlights the differences in how ancient and modern audiences perceived women and female roles, as well as societal shifts over time with regards to fidelity.

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