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A Gray Area

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A Gray Area

LINDSAY SMITH

CLS 1600: Introduction to Classical Mythology, Fall 2015

Nominated by: Dr. Aaron Wolpert

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Lindsay notes:

When I began writing this paper, I was looking to analyze *The Odyssey* from a new lens and perhaps add a new thread to the critical conversation. As I unpacked the work, I was intrigued by the gender dynamics and decided to explore it. When an audience reads this piece, I hope that it conveys a new perspective on this classic epic that is both engaging and thought-provoking.

Dr. Wolpert notes:

In this essay, Lindsay has produced a graduate-level analysis of the intentionally ambiguous gender dynamics explored in Homer's *Odyssey*. With meticulous attention to details of the text, she has supported a nuanced argument about the manner in which Homer subverted the likely men-are-superior orthodoxy of his era in the depiction of an--at least occasionally--powerful Circe.

In the world of classical literature, Homer's *The Odyssey* has been canonized as a principal text of authority regarding the Greek tradition and mythology. Scholars of the legendary epic may refer to its many narratives to reconstruct the social hierarchy of the era as well as to gain some insight on how the social status quo influenced and quite possibly singularly determined the relationship dynamics between men and women. In a close reading of one of these narratives, namely Odysseus' encounter with Circe in book 10 (lines 149-597), much about the power dynamic between Greek men and women in *The Odyssey* is revealed. While many may read this encounter between Odysseus and Circe as further evidence which confirms that power was a privilege exclusively enjoyed by Greek men, there is another interpretation of this narrative that more readily entertains the concept of power as a tool available to both of the sexes. On the surface, Odysseus' layered encounter with Circe may seem like a struggle for power that divides them along gender lines, but I would argue that this struggle for power does not divide the genders but unites them in a liminal space between dominion and submission that makes power a fluid possession accessible to both men and women in what has been traditionally perceived as a patriarchal narrative. The purpose of this synthesis then, is to examine how Circe's potion, the sexual encounter between Odysseus and Circe, and Circe's captivity and release of Odysseus and his men reconstructs an understanding of the power dynamic between Greek men and women in *The Odyssey* that expands the prevailing view of Greek men as the single proprietors of the power position to include the very significant role women also occupied as power players in this classic epic.

When Odysseus comes into contact with the witch Circe, the two engage in a power struggle which suggests that power is a fluid possession that is not only available to both of them, but also traps them in between a position of absolute power as each tries to gain the upper hand. That Odysseus and Circe are locked in a battle for power is clearly seen in Circe's application of, and Odysseus' immunity to, her potion. When Circe gives Odysseus her potion, it is her attempt to gain the upper hand in the situation. Of her attempt Odysseus states, "She gave me the cup and I drank it off, but it did not bewitch me. So she struck me with her wand and said: 'Off to the sty, with the rest of your friends'" (Book 10, lines 338-341). When Circe gives Odysseus her potion, she is clearly in a position of power. As she sentences Odysseus to the same fate as his men, she is dismissive and arrogant because she has gained the advantage in their tug of war for

control. When Circe “strikes” Odysseus with her wand, she thinks that she has dominated him, but the fact that Odysseus is immune to her potion also gives him a claim to some of the power. Even though Odysseus has power over Circe because he cannot be changed into a pig like his men, Circe still retains some of the power because Odysseus’ men are still pigs in her sty. That both Odysseus and Circe can stake some claim to the power in the situation, but not the controlling interest, shows that this struggle to essentially come out on top places both of them in a tug of war between submission and dominion that forces each to make concessions and negotiations to gain the most control. When Circe thinks she has the power, she seems to be easing out of the liminal space, only to be thrust back into it when Odysseus is impervious to her witchery. Similarly, Odysseus seems to have the power when Circe is catering to him, but he, too, is thrust back into that liminal space when he realizes that Circe still controls the fate of his men. In this way, neither Odysseus nor Circe have absolute power, but rather operate from an in between place that allows both to move in and out of the power position. When Circe gives her potion to Odysseus, it becomes clear that the pursuit of power is not limited to gender, and its subjectivity to change between the sexes shows that perhaps Greek men and women both used power to assert their own agendas in *The Odyssey*.

If the outcome of Circe’s potion showcases that power is a fluid possession accessible to both Greek men and women as they oscillate between positions of dominion and submission, the sexual encounter between Odysseus and Circe, shows that power was an exchangeable commodity utilized by both men and women to gain control. When Circe realizes that she cannot control Odysseus with her potion and he draws his sword, she quickly offers sex in exchange for her life. In her offer Circe states, “Well then, sheath your sword and let’s climb into my bed and tangle in love there, so we may come to trust each other” (Book 10, lines 355-57). In this case, Circe’s sexual abilities are her power which she exchanges for her life. When she asks Odysseus to go to bed with her, Circe falls back into a place where she has given a lot, but not all, of her power to Odysseus. As a result, she does not have the full power, but she is also not powerless. Furthermore, and as shown by the last part of the aforementioned quote, Circe is willing to exchange some of her power to build trust between her and Odysseus. She is willing to submit to him if it means that she can keep some of her control and her life. On the other hand, Odysseus also uses Circe’s proposition for sex to further

establish his power in his quest to save his men and himself from further trouble. In the same way that Circe exchanges the power she gets from propositioning sex for her life, Odysseus exchanges the power he gets from having sex with women to keep himself out of more danger. Before Odysseus agrees to have sex with Circe, he makes her promise that she will not make his situation any worse. In his demand, Odysseus states, “No, Goddess, I’m not getting into any bed with you unless you agree first to swear a solemn oath that you’re not planning some new trouble for me” (Book 10, lines 363-366). By making Circe promise that she will not trick him again, Odysseus exchanges his sexual power for protection. Even though Odysseus concedes to Circe’s request, he has not given up all of his power; he has just exchanged it to continue his mission. That both Odysseus and Circe exchange some of their power when they agree to go to bed together shows that power can be a negotiation tool used to achieve goals and find middle ground between operatives of control.

When it is time for Odysseus and his men to continue their voyage home, Odysseus and Circe both move in and out of the position of power. After spending a year on the island with Circe, it seems that both Odysseus and Circe have become comfortable in the middle ground between dominance and submission that they have established with one another. It is when Odysseus asks Circe to stay true to her promise to let him and his men go home that the two again begin to vie for the ultimate claim to power. When Odysseus asks Circe to let him and his men go, he takes control of the situation--and the power--by using Circe’s promise as leverage to get him and his men home. He appeals to Circe stating, “I went up to Circe’s beautiful bed, and touching her knees I beseeched the goddess: Circe fulfill now the promise you made to send me home. I am eager to be gone...” (Book 10, lines 500-504). When Odysseus asks Circe to send him and his men home, he uses a gentler approach to force Circe into the position of submission. However, even though Circe consents to send Odysseus home which gives him some power, she does not relent into the full position of submission because she controls how Odysseus will get home. Again, neither Odysseus nor Circe has complete control in the situation, but neither has conceded all of their power to the other. That Circe still has some power over what happens to Odysseus is made clear when she tells Odysseus that she is sending him through Hades as he makes his way home, and he begs her to guide him on the journey. When he finds out that he is going to Hades, Odysseus pleads, “And who will guide me on this journey Circe? No man has ever sailed his black

ship to Hades” (Book 10, lines 524-525). When Odysseus asks for Circe’s assistance he not only gives up some portion of his power, he recognizes that Circe has more power than he does. This is significant at this point in the narrative because it is the precursor to Odysseus’ reunion with Penelope where he will again engage in a power struggle with a woman.

That Odysseus must depend on Circe to guide him and his men home shows that both Odysseus and Circe are operating from some space between submission and dominance that allows both to share in some of the power, and arguably prepares Odysseus with the skills to negotiate his return to Ithaca with Penelope.

In many episodes of *The Odyssey*, the dynamic of power is a common thread that largely influences many of the outcomes for Odysseus on his quest to return home. However, in Odysseus’ exchange with the witch, Circe, this power dynamic expands to factor in a space in between the agencies of submission and dominance that considers a place for women in the power position. In deconstructing the use and exchange of power between men and women in this episode of *The Odyssey*, the usually black and white depiction of relations between Greek men and women in the epic may be repainted to include a gray area where both genders coexisted by manipulating situations of power.

Works Cited

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000. Print.