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## **A Shift in Perspective: Temptress Witch to Realistic Woman**

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A Shift in Perspective: Temptress Witch to Realistic Woman

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A Thesis

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

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by

Caroline Conroy

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## ABSTRACT

In mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American translations of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus is painted as a courageous, clever king while the briefly-featured Circe is portrayed as a temptress witch. This dichotomy changes, however, by the time these characters are featured in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century adaptations of Homer's work; both released in 2018, Madeline Miller's *Circe* and Delia Owens's *Where the Crawdads Sing* reclaim Circe's depiction by portraying a Circe-like character as a powerful protagonist, aware of her strengths and weaknesses. By analyzing the archetype of the witch and how it is reflective of patriarchal society's efforts to reduce and isolate women's power, I argue that the Anglo-American literary tradition of *The Odyssey* demonizes powerful women by portraying Circe as a witch to be feared. In contrast, Miller's and Owens's works offer an alternative Circe, one who is as a powerful woman, able to form relationships and gain knowledge outside the bounds of male-dominated society.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Chapter One: Navigating Isolation .....	15
Chapter Two: Redefining Witches' Magical Relationship to Ecological Systems .....	31
Chapter Three: Sexuality .....	44
Conclusion .....	58

## INTRODUCTION

Composed orally over centuries, finally set down during the archaic period in ancient Greek and attributed to an individual named Homer, *The Odyssey* tells the story of the Odysseus's journey home with his men after fighting in the Trojan War. For part of this journey, Odysseus encounters and stays for a prolonged amount of time on an island inhabited by the sorceress Circe. At first, the relationship between Odysseus and Circe is unpleasant, as she uses her powers of enchantment to turn Odysseus's men into pigs after luring them to her home on Aiaia island. However, once Odysseus himself confronts Circe, he overcomes her attempts to transform him as well, and, in an effort to save herself, Circe offers her bed, one of the factors which causes Odysseus to postpone his journey home to his family and kingdom in Ithaca. Many of these plot points—where she lives isolated from both immortal and human society amongst her animal companions, Circe using her powers of enchantment to turn the men into pigs, Circe offering her bed to Odysseus and him staying with her for a prolonged period of time because of it—remain in the multitudinous translations and retellings of *The Odyssey*, which span across many time periods and societies. Not only do many of these plot point remain throughout many versions of Odysseus and Circe's story, but three core elements remain at the heart of Circe's depiction in various works and function as sites for reworking Circe's figure as a temptress witch.

In 1615, George Chapman produced the first English translation of *The Odyssey*, and as a result of this, Odysseus's story became accessible for English-language readers who did not know how to read Ancient Greek. Though this translation provided seventeenth-century English literates access to the story of Circe and Odysseus, it also perpetuates Chapman's own interpretation of this story. Judith Yarnall contends that Chapman's translation shows perhaps an obligation, on his part, to remain loyal to Homer's poem but notes that "Chapman devalues what is bodily or physical by adding disparaging judgments not found in the Greek text."<sup>1</sup> Chapman's translation, as Yarnall evaluates it, accurately presents Homer's text for the most part, although it is skewed by the pervasive judgments and anxieties of his time, the late Renaissance. This age's fear of women defying the social constructs of English society are best seen in the English-language tradition of *The Odyssey* through Circe's character:

Circe embodied the unsettling power of woman over man: a power that ran counter to the established man-over-woman sexual hierarchy that was one of the few secure anchors in this era of tumultuous economic, political, and religious change. The magical or supernatural quality of her powers was also disturbing, for what was to differentiate it from the influence of demons, or her deeds from witchcraft? She was the mythic 'witch' most familiar to this period still sufficiently medieval to believe in the power of witches and sufficiently disturbed to see these powers almost everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

Yarnall's insights suggest that translations, specifically Chapman's, were and are influenced by the translator's own personal as well as society's collective values and concerns. She points out that it was during this period when Circe's identification as a

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Yarnall, *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Yarnall, *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress*, 100.

witch is inserted into her mythology in the English literary tradition. Though Chapman's work does not call Circe a witch, specifically, it displays a bias against the bodily and the sensual, one of the critiques of witches in addition to their magical powers, and bias "can be established as truth and, once established as such, how tenaciously it can flourish."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Chapman's translation opens the possibility of other works using Circe's character to display their fears of powerful women.

According to Susan Amussen and David Underdown, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England saw a rise in fear of powerful and unruly women, who were labelled and persecuted as witches, in an attempt by threatened men to control them or, if that was not possible, remove them. These women were those who operated outside the norms and bounds of society: "Those women who resisted the patriarchal order in any one of these ways were threatening [...]. The responses to disorderly women were one way to ensure that social order did not change, and that patriarchal equilibrium was maintained."<sup>4</sup> Amussen and Underdown provide multiple examples for the kinds of offenses of which women were accused, such as scolding, bearing a child out of wedlock, and living alone. Single women who lived alone "and 'out of service,' with no household head responsible for them, were a particular problem."<sup>5</sup> These single women posed a significant threat because they were in charge of their own beings, showed that it was possible, and any

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<sup>3</sup> Yarnall, *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress*, 100.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Dwyer Amussen and David Underdown, *Gender, Culture and Politics in England, 1560-1640: Turning the World Upside Down* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 27, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>5</sup> Amussen and Underdown, *Gender, Culture and Politics in England*, 30.



kind of monetary gains they were able to make were theirs alone. Silvia Federici also identifies these behaviors as characteristics of “the witch” in fifteenth- to seventeenth-century England and writes that healers and practitioners of magic were seen as threats to the “local and national power structure” because the women were popular in the community and earning a living.<sup>6</sup> She adds that these women used remedies, possibly from studying herbs and plants, for their practices. Animals, too, were often associated with witchcraft, and Federici explains that in the seventeenth century, animal “familiars” were common in English witch trials, “as evidence of the irrational, bestial nature of the ‘witch’ and potentially every woman.”<sup>7</sup> Federici also notes that many of the accusations against witches were related to “‘lewd,’ ‘promiscuous’ behavior.”<sup>8</sup> Based on Amussen and Underdown’s as well as Federici’s analysis, seventeenth-century England’s archetype of a witch grew out the fear of women defying and threatening society’s structure by living alone, practicing magic with the non-human world, and expressing their sexuality.

Federici grounds the fear of witches in the growth of capitalist society in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and later in early America: “Capitalist development began with a war on women: the witch hunts of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries that in Europe and the New World led to the deaths of thousands.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), 40, iBooks.

<sup>7</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 84.

Violence against women, Federici expands, continued through the abolition of slavery into the twenties and thirties of the last century with the Eugenics movement. She stresses that “the sterilization of women of color, poor women, and women who practiced their sexuality outside of marriage continued into the 1960s.”<sup>10</sup> In her timeline of witch-hunts, Federici also notes the prevalence of sexuality amongst those kinds of behaviors which were deemed out of bounds by society, and according to those in power, this behavior needed a consequence. Federici then catalogs more examples of witch hunts against women in recent years, arguing that:

[...] we are witnessing an escalation of violence against women, especially Afro-descendant and Native American women, because ‘globalization’ is a process of political recolonization intended to give capital uncontested control over the world’s natural wealth and human labor, and this cannot be achieved without attacking women, who are directly responsible for the reproduction of their communities.<sup>11</sup>

Federici points out that witch hunts were used as a special kind of violence against women to keep them within the bounds of society, and this form of witch hunt is very much present today with the sexual violence against indigenous and Latina women, the demonization of women’s choice over their own bodies and abortion rights, and many more. The forces at play against women in these witch hunts are the same kinds which criticize Circe in this antifeminist Anglo-American literary tradition: women need to be kept within the bounds of society in order for women’s ability to reproduce and, therefore, their reproductive labor to be controlled and exploited for the sake of capital.

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<sup>10</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 86.

Federici connects the violence committed against women to the need to control and displace the power which women have within the world, while also specifically recognizing the atrocities committed against women of color. Even as Federici elevates concerns about the atrocities against women of color, some works which rewrite the perception of witches, like the two contemporary works in this thesis, do not explicitly recognize the struggles of Black women and trans women; instead they operate on the level of second-wave feminism, a movement largely led by white women to re-evaluate gender roles and end discrimination against women. I will interrogate this perspective further in the conclusion of my thesis.

Despite its blind-spots, such feminism had salutary effects that I trace in this thesis. Around the same time that twentieth-century America was experiencing the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 70s, it also saw a shift in the depiction of Circe away from the temptress witch with Eudora Welty's 1955 short story "Circe" and Toni Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*. In Welty's story named after Homer's character, Yarnall detects something new compared to the male-authored portrayal of Circe, as Welty paints her Circe as "a strong-voiced, clear-eyed, solitary figure who speaks out knowingly about her powers and their limits."<sup>12</sup> Robert Fitzgerald's 1961 translation of *The Odyssey*, however, emerges into circulation a short six years after Welty's "Circe" was released. While Welty's work appears to present the possibility of feminist reworkings of Circe's figure in this ancient mythology, Fitzgerald's translation returns to the traditional telling of the story and reigns in the impact of Welty's

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<sup>12</sup> Yarnall, *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress*, 2.

possibilities. However, Manuela Lopez Ramírez claims that a transformation similar to Welty's Circe occurs with Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as she transforms the Circean archetype of witch/crone and "reinvents the Western classical witch."<sup>13</sup> The release of Morrison's work suggests that new perspectives on Circe's story by women writers could not be suppressed. Again, though, an exploration of Circe's story is followed by a reinforcement of the traditional Anglo-American framing of Odysseus and Circe with Robert Fagles's 1996 translation and a 1998 edition of Fitzgerald's translation. Despite the persistent traditional tellings of *The Odyssey*, written by men, that portray Circe as a temptress witch, both Welty and Morrison's works acted as a shift away from the norm in this Anglo-American tradition of the story.

This shift opened pathways and possibilities for the first translation of *The Odyssey* by a woman with Emily Wilson's 2017 translation and the contemporary novels, both published in 2018, which will be the topic of this thesis, Madeline Miller's *Circe* and Delia Owens's *Where the Crawdads Sing*. As Welty's and Morrison's reworkings of Circe's story coincided with the beginning and the end of second-wave feminism, Wilson's translation as well as Miller and Owens's also emerge alongside feminist movements in the United States. These works are released close to a decade after the start of the "Me Too" movement, founded by Tarana Burke to empower women in the fight against sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape. The necessity of movements like the "Me Too" movement was reinforced when presidential candidate Donald Trump was

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<sup>13</sup> Manuela Lopez Ramírez, "The New Witch in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *God Help the Child*," *African American Review* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 42, Literature Online.

heard saying “Grab ‘em by the pussy” on video in 2016 prior to his election as president in January of 2017. The contemporary novels by Miller and Owens not only present feminist reworkings of Circe’s story, but they also make visible the oppressive tactics of isolation and sexual violence against women in twenty-first century United States.

Unlike Welty and Morrison, these novels by Miller and Owens are likely to be overlooked by scholars, and a part of the story of Circe’s transformation in our own time would be lost. Despite their feminist reappraisals of Circe, and primarily because of their relatability, accessibility, and marketability, these novels could be labeled “middlebrow” works that lack intellectual or literary value. Middlebrow novels, literature written and read by mostly middle-class women, for example, are often “considered [...] inferior in form and content” because of this accessibility and their “readerly” qualities.<sup>14</sup> While these texts are certainly “readerly,” Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter argue that middlebrow novels are not strictly readerly but contain some aspects of the openness of the “writerly,”<sup>15</sup> associated with masculine avant-garde works: “middlebrow writing may at the same time be conducive to escapist consumption and include challenges to the established order.”<sup>16</sup> Though Ehland and Wächter deal with twentieth-century middlebrow works, this type of novel and the critiques it carries continue into our contemporary context. Both Miller’s *Circe* and Owens’s *Crawdads* could be considered

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<sup>14</sup> Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter, eds., *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 2-3, Ebscohost Ebooks Comprehensive Academic Collection (North America).

<sup>15</sup> Ehland and Wächter take this language from Roland Barthes’s *S/Z*.

<sup>16</sup> Ehland and Wächter, eds., *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945*, 3.

contemporary middlebrow novels due to their popularity amongst readers and the fact that they were both written by women.<sup>17</sup> This label has historically been used to dismiss literature by and for women, and it is here used to justify overlooking the insights which *Circe* and *Crawdads* provide for contemporary society, especially about women's position in society.

Some of the same prejudices against middlebrow novels also apply to other women authors' writings about *Circe*. Even Emily Wilson's otherwise widely praised 2017 translation of *The Odyssey* is criticized by George Grimbilas, who claims that Wilson dishonors Homer's text for Wilson's simplicity, accessibility, and lack of poetry. Based on a conversation with Wilson, Wyatt Mason writes that Wilson anticipated some of these criticisms. She tells Mason that translation is not valued in the academy because "there is no perception that it's serious intellectually. It's imagined as a subset of outreach. That you're going to be communicating with the masses, which is less important than being innovative within your field."<sup>18</sup> Wilson then argues that translation—communicating with the masses—is innovative. By invalidating the works of these women authors, those who have historically held the privilege of education and power in the Western institution of literary studies—mostly white men—employ similar

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<sup>17</sup> Claire Messud, "The Good Witch," review of *Circe*, by Madeline Miller, *New York Times Book Review*, Jun 03, 2018; Tina Jordan, "Inside the List," review of *Where the Crawdads Sing*, by Delia Owens, *New York Times Book Review*, September 23, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Wyatt Mason, "The First Woman to Translate the 'Odyssey' into English," *New York Times*, November 02, 2017, para. 28, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/magazine/the-first-woman-to-translate-the-odyssey-into-english.html>.

tactics of isolation and dismissal to those used against Circe. Despite these attempts, the popularity and success of these contemporary reworkings make the Circe myth accessible to and inclusive of groups beyond those who have contributed to this Anglo-American literary tradition, and this accessibility challenges those who selfishly hoard power in their institutions.

Grimbilas's critique echoes the kind of reasoning used to defend the dominance of the Western literary canon and deny the inclusion of works within Black, queer, or gender and women's studies. As many English departments switch to be more inclusive of these fields of study, some professors see the stubborn defense of the literary canon as an attempt "to disconnect literary study from the struggle for social equity and racial justice."<sup>19</sup> Jesse Alemán argues that English departments do so at their own peril because "literary production cannot be separated from social crises, that literature matters because of its social context."<sup>20</sup> Ehland and Wächter echo Alemán's argument on the value of literature's social context, but specifically in relation to middlebrow novels, writing,

they were part of a wider literary scene that interacted with and responded to the social issues and anxieties of their times. One of their concerns was the shifting demarcation of gender relations. They show how gender identities are challenged and negotiated in literary texts and how the tectonic system of gender relations begins to shift and erupt.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jesse Alemán, "The End of English," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 136, no. 3 (2021): 472, doi:10.1632/S0030812921000237.

<sup>20</sup> Alemán, "The End of English," 471.

<sup>21</sup> Ehland and Wächter, eds., *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945*, 17.

This shift in gender relations and a production of literature which conveys today's social anxieties is evident in the history of novels depicting Circe, some of the most recent of which are the topic of this thesis.

Due to the misconception of the critical value which these works hold, my thesis will fill the gap in scholarship on how *Circe* and *Crawdads* demonstrate a shift in representation and contribute to a contextual understanding of the contemporary social anxieties of women as they continue to face the same tactics of exclusion via isolation from society, demonization for their connection with non-human beings to generate power and livelihood, and sexual violence that have been used by men against women for centuries in both England and America. These tactics, however, are different across those many societies and would not be experienced the same way by all women nor would they be handled the same way in any one location in the contemporary U.S. These novels, instead, try to shine light on how patriarchal thinking leads to the demonization of women and they urge readers to re-think their notions of powerful women, specifically Circe. By illuminating these issues dealing with isolation, association with the non-human living world, and sexuality and using their protagonist's perspective, *Circe* and *Crawdads* reclaim the characteristics of a witch once used to criticize Circe and powerful women like her.

Miller's *Circe* is a direct retelling of the Greek myths. In it, Miller details Circe's life from childhood through many, many years of her immortal adult life. While many of the plot points of the Circe myth remain the same—such as Circe being responsible for the monster Scylla, living on Aiaia, turning Odysseus's men into pigs, bedding Odysseus, and eventually helping him leave her to return home—Miller provides more information



and narrative possibilities with her choice of Circe as narrator. Readers find in the novel a number of new insights and incidents: Circe's demonstration of empathy and humanity with Prometheus's punishment, interactions with family, a movement from jealousy to sympathy, a desire for love and connection, a struggle to find and develop her powers, and the trials and celebrations of motherhood. The additional information and different perspective on the Circe myth allow Miller to challenge the perception that Circe is merely a temptress witch.<sup>22</sup>

Though *Where the Crawdads Sing* contains many similarities to both *Circe* and *The Odyssey*, Owens does not cite the Circe myth as an influence for this novel; instead, in "A Conversation with Delia Owens," she discusses how her own experience of isolation inspired her to write the story of Kya, also known as the "Marsh Girl."<sup>23</sup> In *Crawdads*, Kya is abandoned little by little by her entire family and left to provide for herself. Kya is able to secure food and other basic necessities by selling fish and clams that she procures from the marsh, and one of her only connections and friends, Jumpin', an older Black man, helps her to stay afloat. The narration focuses largely on Kya and reveals her emotions, ambitions, and reflections, but almost every other chapter covers other characters as the murder of Chase Andrews, the town's golden-boy, is uncovered. Because the murder is revealed almost immediately in the novel while also recounting Kya's years as a child, readers wonder how the two storylines will intersect until Kya is much older and enters into a romantic relationship with Chase. At the same times that

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<sup>22</sup> Madeline Miller, *Circe: A Novel* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Delia Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2018), 379.

readers are informed of Chase's sexual abuse of Kya at the end of their relationship, the investigators also start to connect the two and Kya is sent to trial as the main suspect in Chase's murder. Kya's story echoes the three elements—isolation, association with the non-human living world, and sexuality—common to Circe's portrayal in various works, though Owens makes no mention of intentional similarities between Kya's story and the Circe myth. Despite this lack of intentionality, Owens exposes the demonization of Circe as a witch as, more accurately, an attack against women in general.

Chapter One addresses how male-dominated society uses the tactic of isolation to remove women seen as a threat, especially women labeled as witches like Circe. Translations of *The Odyssey* by Robert Fagles and Robert Fitzgerald portray Circe as a danger to the men who arrive on her island, as her isolation indicates that she is a threat given the Ancient Greeks' perception of exile. *Circe* deflects the criticism aimed at Circe for her isolation by society and garners sympathy for her instead by exposing Circe as the victim instead of a threat. Miller shows us that one of the most effective means of social isolation comes from the tactic that we would now call gaslighting. Owens is less concerned with a strategy than with how groups are formed and maintained and provides a more specific context of Kya attempting to enter the scientific community to show how isolation is used against women to control their status and success. Both contemporary novels expose how society uses isolation against women to limit their power and they not only generate sympathy for their protagonists but show how they work to overcome those limits.

Chapter Two focuses on Circe's association with the non-human living world and begins with how Kya using her connection to her surrounding ecosystem to not only

survive her isolation but “thrive.” Kya gains almost familial bonds with the animals and organisms of the marsh and a kind of unbelievable power from her knowledge of the marsh. In Miller’s novel, Circe’s powers also come from learning from, observing, and using plants, herbs, their qualities and capabilities. While *The Odyssey* translations negatively depict Circe’s powers and connection to plant-life and her powerful animal companions as wild and wicked, the contemporary novels prove just how reasonable they are. An analysis of all three Circe stories illustrates how it is not the plants, the animals, or the overall ecosystem which threaten male society; rather, it is women’s perceived special connection to them which does.

Chapter Three concerns Circe’s label as a temptress and explores both past and present perceptions of female sexuality. In *The Odyssey*, Circe is the villain for luring Odysseus’s men to her home, transforming them into pigs, and prolonging Odysseus’s stay by means of her sexual relationship with him. *Circe* uses Circe’s narrative perspective to provide her reasoning for why she transforms men into pigs; it is not out of cruelty but rather Circe enacting a form of justice for the sexual violence committed against her. Kya, too, gets her own kind of justice. Through Kya’s trial, Owens exposes how patriarchal society in the United States views female sexuality both in the past and now. *Circe* and *Crawdads* flip the blame for the violence that occurs in each story from the Circe-like character to men, or male-dominated society as a whole, and encourage readers to listen to women’s stories about the ongoing violence to disrupt the lack of accountability in the sexual violence against women which prevails in this Anglo-American tradition and in the United States.

## CHAPTER ONE: NAVIGATING ISOLATION

As Susan Amussen, David Underdown, and Federici all noted, isolation has been a frequent identifier of witches in Anglo-American literature and patriarchal, capitalist society. For male-dominated society, isolating a woman, or witch, is a tactic used to limit the woman's potential power; however, this tactic only goes so far because men need women's reproductive labor to sustain their male-dominated society. Isolation as a patriarchal strategy to limit women's power is a difficult one to use effectively, and the possibility that a woman could overcome the limits of isolation to thrive in a space beyond the male-dominated society is incredibly fear-provoking for those dependent upon women's participation in capitalist society. Because of this possibility, men and—in the case of this thesis—male authors require additional tactics, such as social demonization, to oppress threatening women.

In the Anglo-American literary tradition of *The Odyssey*, represented in this thesis by Robert Fagles's and Robert Fitzgerald's translations, Circe is marked as a witch, a contributing factor being her isolation, and is portrayed through the male fear of powerful woman who have successfully separated from society.<sup>24</sup> Fagles and Fitzgerald imply

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<sup>24</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fagles (Penguin Random House LLC, 2002), iBooks; Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). Further citations of Homer will be according to the translator, book, and line number. I chose to use Fagles and Fitzgerald's translations in this thesis because of their popularity and recognition within academia as well as the times when they were released.

Circe's isolation by describing her location within, or rather away from, her familial line.

Fitzgerald is brief: "Our next landfall was on Aiaia, island / of Kirkê, dire beauty and divine, / sister of baleful Aiêtês, like him / fathered by Hêlios the light of mortals / on Persê, child of the Ocean stream."<sup>25</sup> Fagles writes a bit more:

We reached the Aeaean island next, the home of Circe/ the nymph with lovely braids, an awesome power too/ who can speak with human voice,/ the true sister of murderous-minded Aeetes./ Both were bred by the Sun who lights our lives;/ their mother was Perse, a child the Ocean bore.<sup>26</sup>

Despite her immortality, she does not live amongst others of her kind; instead, she calls Aiaia her home.

Though Circe does not live with her family or have any human cohabitants on Aiaia, according to Fagles's and Fitzgerald's translations, she does live with animal companions. While Odysseus's men creep up to Circe's home, they notice her "mountain wolves and lions were roaming round the grounds—/ she'd bewitched them herself, she gave them magic drugs."<sup>27</sup> The word "bewitched" in Fagles's translation suggests a forced relationship and companionship between Circe and her animals as a result of her isolation from other immortals and humans. Fitzgerald translates something similar: "In the wild wood they found an open glade, / around a smooth stone house—the hall of Kirke—/and wolves and mountain lions lay there, mild/ in her soft spell, fed on her drug of evil."<sup>28</sup> Rather than "bewitched" by "magic drugs," Circe's animals have been fed a

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<sup>25</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Odyssey*, X, 149-53.

<sup>26</sup> Fagles, *The Odyssey*, X, 148-53.

<sup>27</sup> Fagles, X, 231-2.

<sup>28</sup> Fitzgerald, X, 229-32.

“drug of evil.” To Odysseus’s men, who are used to the structured forms of agriculture in their home of Ithaca, it is inconceivable that these undomesticated animals have a home of their own with Circe. Because they see Circe thriving in this ecosystem, grown from her isolation from human and immortal society, the men must find a way to reassert their way of living in society as the better one, and so they see the animals as “bewitched.”

Similar language is used to describe Circe’s transformation of Odysseus’s men when they enter her home. Again, Fagles’s language implies forced companionship: “She ushered them in to sit on high-backed chairs,/ then she mixed them a potion —cheese, barley/ and pale honey mulled in Pramnian wine —/ but into the brew she stirred her wicked drugs/ to wipe from their memories any thought of home.”<sup>29</sup> Fagles depicts Circe as having complete control of the situation, and this defies the power structure of the men’s society. In this instance, the focus on her every detail and the descriptor of “wicked” suggests Circe’s power over them and matches Amussen’s and Underdown’s research on “the widespread concern about the ‘woman on top’ in contemporary society. [...] The ideal vision of society was one in which everyone lived in a household governed by a patriarch, with obedient women, servants and children.”<sup>30</sup> Not only did Circe’s power as a woman in power incite fear in men, but also the idea of never returning home. Fagles portrays Circe as pulling Odysseus’s men into exile with her and farther and farther away from his home.

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<sup>29</sup> Fagles, X, 256-60.

<sup>30</sup> Amussen and Underdown, *Gender, Culture and Politics in England, 1560-1640: Turning the World Upside Down*, 27.

Home is a concept, place, and feeling of particular importance to Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, as it is the destination his journey. Odysseus's home fits solidly into the ideal English society that Amussen and Underdown point out—and this may be one of the reasons for the popularity of translations of Homer in the Anglo-American tradition—but only if he is there. Without Odysseus in Ithaca, there is no patriarch of the household and this causes chaos for the women, servants, and children. Therefore, Circe is also responsible for the upheaval of social order specifically within Ithaca while Odysseus stays with her because her “wicked powers” caused Odysseus to forget about his home.

Odysseus's wife Penelope and their son Telemachus remain in Ithaca while Odysseus is away and with Circe, and thus, Circe is placed in direct comparison with Penelope, Odysseus's wife. Even though both women experience isolation—Circe by living without immortal or human beings and Penelope by being surrounded by men—the Anglo-American literary tradition of their intertwined stories gives rise to fear of Circe and sympathy for Penelope. Because Circe is not struggling through her isolation but rather gaining from it, her success threatens patriarchal society, and therefore, she must be torn down in any way possible. As a result, Circe is labelled as and treated as a witch in an attempt to de-legitimize her power and warn other people of her. Penelope, on the other hand, shows a careful execution of isolation tactics against women. Because Penelope is placed within the male-dominated society, she is without the ability to make choices, relationships, a living, and more for herself; her livelihood and success is dependent upon the men around her, particularly Odysseus. Also with her place in society, she is successfully, according to the patriarchal point of view, locked into her role as someone who can give birth to more members of their society. With Odysseus

gone and spending time with Circe, Penelope is left to fend for herself and her son. By evoking sympathy for Penelope, the Anglo-American translations reinforce Penelope's role as an obedient wife and blame Circe for preventing Odysseus from returning to his place as the king of Ithaca, husband of Penelope, and father of Telemachus. In these translations of *The Odyssey*, Circe presents as a threat to male-dominated society and, specifically, to Odysseus and his men's return; in comparison, Penelope deserves the sympathy of the men and readers for following the structures of said society. As a result, these translators employ the label of the witch to incite fear of this threat and powerful, single women like her. This comparison between Circe and Penelope positions these two women against each other so that one is feared and one is sympathetic when, really, they both struggle to navigate the isolation caused by a male-dominated society.

Miller's *Circe*, which focuses on Circe's perspective instead of Odysseus's like *The Odyssey* translations, exposes the isolation tactics used by patriarchal society to garner sympathy for the exiled Circe and recognizes her power to live in isolation instead of seeing her as a threat to the established hierarchy. Isolation itself as a concept remains as key a component in Circe's witch-making in *Circe* as it is in *The Odyssey*, and Miller's text provides further insight into the mechanics behind isolation and uses the manipulation strategy of what we now call gaslighting to illustrate those mechanics and evoke sympathy for Circe as the victim of such abuse. Miller does not stop with using contemporary insights to empathize with the victim: she empowers Circe after the attempts to weaken her.

In *Circe*, Miller describes Circe's isolation from her family, other immortals, and—for the most part—human beings in extensive detail to display the inner-workings



of those with the most power, namely the community of male gods headed by Zeus. When Circe confesses to her brother that she helped Prometheus, and that is what he was being punished for in the first place—he explains why she should not expose her sentimentality: “You would make Father look like a fool who cannot control his offspring. He would throw you to the crows.”<sup>31</sup> Based on her brother’s comments, isolation is a punishment for being uncontrollable—it is a punishment for posing a threat to the patriarchal system in place which rules the gods as well as humans. Circe’s father Helios, who, in this situation, represents supreme masculine energy as the sun god, uses isolation as a way to make Circe controllable and less powerful after she defied the norm for this male-dominated society by being uncontrollable. Part of what makes an uncontrollable woman so threatening is the impact that they can have on the larger community. If Circe is not punished, and seen as being punished, for her defiance against the rules and norms of her male-dominated society, then it shows other people, especially other women, that their society does not have to follow that hierarchy. Therefore, Helios and Zeus control her impact on the larger social order by physically isolating her and preventing her from making connections with others.

Federici, in her book *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, explains another motivation for society’s desire to control women through isolation. Federici writes:

There is undoubtedly a direct relation between many cases of witch-hunting and the process of the ‘enclosures,’ as demonstrated by the social composition of the accused, the charges made against them, and the common characterization of the witch as a poor old woman, living alone [...] and among the condemned there were

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<sup>31</sup> Miller, *Circe: A Novel*, 30.

women who had achieved a certain degree of power in the community, working as folk healers and midwives or exercising magical practices.<sup>32</sup>

Through her examination of the rise and continuation of capitalism's influence on witch-hunting, Federici reveals that certain women, who held a specific power to connect with non-human others outside of society's bounds, were expelled from those communities because their powers were seen as uncontrollable and unexploitable; if the community cannot exploit the woman's labor and reap the rewards, then dislocating the woman from the people buying and benefiting from her services would remove the threat. Like these powerful women forced into isolation described by Federici, Circe is supposed to be made less powerful by her excommunication from the immortal world and isolation on the lands of the mortal world.

In addition to physically isolating Circe as punishment, Helios and the male immortal community also use mental isolation: gaslighting. The main event which leads to Circe's removal is her confession to transforming the nymph Scylla into a monster. With this confession, what was only imagined earlier—in Circe's conversation with her brother about what would happen if she told anyone about helping Prometheus—becomes a reality: Circe acts against social order and demonstrates her power, and, as a result, Helios's authority as a patriarch and ability to control her is threatened. During her confession, Circe explains that certain plants from a specific location helped her perform the transformation. Though the male gods from this story, her uncles, who told her about the location of the plants made magical by immortal blood, deny that they have any

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<sup>32</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 41.

power at all, she is sent to an island chosen by her father which does not provide access to the specific plants she used previously. Circe's uncles claim that they would not have told her about these locations if the plants did possess powers to avoid looking stupid and, again, attempt to reassert control. If they did not claim that, then they would have to acknowledge that Circe could wield power capable of extreme transformations, and to admit to her power would be to admit to their own weakness and susceptibility to mistakes. Circe's uncles, in this instance, use the psychological and sociological tactic of gaslighting to try to re-establish their power and Circe's lack of it. Gaslighting, Elena Ruíz writes, "came to be known as an interpersonal abuse mechanism or pressure tactic that enables abusers to get inside the heads of their intended victims for the purposes of asserting power and/or establishing control."<sup>33</sup> By claiming that the plants have no magical power and that Circe is not responsible for Scylla's transformation, Circe's uncles distort what Circe believes to be real, and, because of the uncles' status as older men in immortal society, their gaslighting technique causes Circe to doubt her power and reality. Paige Sweet, in her study of a sociological theory of gaslighting, points out how social status is a crucial component in the efficacy of gaslighting:

First, gaslighting works when deployed in power-unequal intimate relationships, creating an environment of 'surreality.' Second, gaslighting works when perpetrators mobilize gender-based stereotypes, intersecting inequalities, and institutional vulnerabilities against victims.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Elena Ruíz, "Cultural Gaslighting," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 35, no. 4 (2020): 688.

<sup>34</sup> Paige L. Sweet, "The Sociology of Gaslighting," *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 5 (2019): 852, Sage Journals Premier 2022.

It is her uncles' known social power which makes their claims harmful. After all, Circe would not be able to gaslight them as she carries little status in immortal society and can barely make her own assertions.

To deliver a harsher blow than the uncles, Helios, who has the most status, fires,

'You dare contradict me? You who cannot light a single flame, or call one drop of water? Worst of my children, faded and broken, whom I cannot pay a husband to take. Since you were born, I pitied you and allowed you license, yet you grew disobedient and proud. Will you make me hate you more?'<sup>35</sup>

Not only does Helios use the gaslighting technique like the uncles by pointing out her lack of power according to his standards, but he also distances her from the rest of her family with "worst of my children" and from other members of society, "whom I cannot pay a husband to take." Again, isolation rears its manipulative head. Despite her brother revealing that he too has magical powers and legitimizing Circe's assertions about her own powers, Circe is the only one punished with exile because

'each of [Circe's brothers and sisters] has sworn besides that their powers came unbidden and unlooked for, from no malice or attempted revolt. They stumbled upon the magic of herbs by accident. [...] Each of them except for Circe. You were all here when she confessed that she sought her powers openly. She had been warned to stay away, yet she disobeyed.'<sup>36</sup>

In punishment, Circe is distanced from her other family members, guilty of also possessing witch-like powers, because she poses a threat to the current power and social structure. Her deliberate desire for power outside of her rank within this society and her disregard for the rules of this society codes her as a threat to their institution, and

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<sup>35</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 63.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 73.

isolation is the punishment for those who threaten the current system. Helios confirms, “She is exiled to a deserted island where she can do no more harm.”<sup>37</sup>

Miller’s *Circe* takes the concept of physical isolation, which is a visible tactic in *The Odyssey*, and exposes the kind of mental isolation that women often experience today when men, in particular, deny the validity and power of women. In *Crawdads*, both forms of isolation are likewise represented. Despite her incredible knowledge of the marsh, even those closest to Kya, who see and accept her power when in her environment, do not see how her power would be accepted in the amongst the powerful community of male-dominated academia. Tate, for example, reflects on the difference between his and her worlds and methods of studying life’s organisms:

He’d been at college less than two months [...]. At last, surrounded by enormous questions and people as curious as he to find the answers, drawing him toward his goal of research biologist in his own lab [...]. Kya’s mind could easily live there, but she could not.<sup>38</sup>

Though Kya holds the knowledge and intelligence to be an institutionally-recognized scientist, she is unable to physically be a part of the academic space because she does not conform to their specific mode of study and because she is “tormented, isolated, and strange.”<sup>39</sup> Kya’s knowledge is at first illegitimate because her relationship to her study is unrecognizable to the methods for acquiring knowledge from those of the school or laboratory structure of Tate’s world.

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<sup>37</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 156.

<sup>39</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 156.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs reflects on the traditional form of study honored in the male-dominated scientific community and writes that this community employs the process of “identification” or “the process through which we say what is what, like which dolphin is that over there and what are its properties.”<sup>40</sup> Through the process of identification, the human holds power over the non-human, the human observes the non-human, and the humans discuss the non-human as if the non-human isn’t living. This form of study is exclusionary—not only of its non-human “subjects,” but also of other people who do not follow this traditional form of acquiring knowledge. Kya moves between the scientific community’s method of identification to acquire knowledge and her own where she chooses to “*identify with*” the living organisms<sup>41</sup>—plants, insects, and animals—of the marsh. Owens demonstrates Kya’s ability to use both methods: “Her collections [of marsh specimens] matured, categorized methodically by order, genus, and species; by age according to bone wear; by size in millimeters of feathers; or by the most fragile hues of greens.”<sup>42</sup> In this example, Kya shows her ability to identify the organisms of the marsh through the modes of identification that are recognized by the scientific community of biologists, but she also expresses her own form of identification with the “fragile hues of greens.” The various and subtle shade of green may not be valuable to the scientific community due to their system of values, methods of identification, and

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<sup>40</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Chicago: AK Press, 2020), 8.

<sup>41</sup> Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 146.

distanced relationship with the marsh. Because Kya's forms of knowledge are unrecognizable to the scientific community and troubles their established hierarchy, she is excluded from it and judged for it.

If scientists can control and benefit from Kya's knowledge in any way, then they will engage with her, as they ultimately do in *Crawdads*. Even so, they maintain control over her by continuing to keep her isolated mentally. Society and employers will use gaslighting tactics to make women feel mentally alone by implying that other places and other people will not be as accepting of someone's unique talents and non-traditional approaches, so that person should therefore take what they can get. For most of her life, Kya works only for herself by selling what she catches and gathers from the marsh. However, with a supportive push from Tate, Kya sends her work of the marsh—diagrams, sketches, documentation, and more—to a publisher and receives an offer to publish it. Tate plays a significant role in the mediation between Kya and her book publishers to act as a credible source within society to vouch for Kya; but, while he may think that he is helping her become accomplished, it is only by his society's standards. By publishing Kya's works but not working alongside Kya or inviting her into their community, the publishers working with the scientific community profit from Kya's work while keeping her at a distance. If Kya is still at a distance from the resources of this community, then she is reliant on their relationship in order to share her knowledge with the world and earn money.

Though Tate struggles to bridge the gap between his world and Kya's, his perspective on Kya is one of the kinder ones. In town, people call Kya "Marsh Girl." At

the end of the trial which concludes *Crawdads*, Kya's lawyer speaks out about how the townspeople treat Kya and turns the judgment on them:

'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I grew up in Barkley Cove, and when I was a younger man I heard the tall tales about the Marsh Girl. Yes, let's just get this out in the open. We called her the Marsh Girl. Many still call her that. Some people whispered that she was part wolf or the missing link between ape and man. That her eyes glowed in the dark. Yet in reality, she was only an abandoned child, a little girl surviving on her own in a swamp, hungry and cold, but we didn't help her. [...] Instead we labeled and rejected her because we thought she was different. But, ladies and gentlemen, did we exclude Miss Clark because she was different, or was she different because we excluded her?'<sup>43</sup>

This plot point provides an opportunity for Owens to reveal how marginalized women are perceived by the larger society and to question those perceptions. Kya's lawyer, Tom, implies that marginalized women are non-human because they live outside the bounds of society, citing the whispers of Kya as "part wolf or the missing link between ape and man," and that both Kya and non-humans are inferior. Only once Tom paints Kya as a human and a non-threatening child is Kya worthy of sympathy. While using them himself, Tom exposes society's biases against those who live outside of society's boundaries and norms. He then inquires which came first: the rejection or the perception. Even though this is an important question to consider and causes reflection on the harm that society has inflicted on Kya, the idea remains that difference from the social norm is bad. Tom tries to empower Kya's unique abilities and intellect by naming that what once was the reason for her rejection and weirdness is now the same reason why "scientific institutions recognize her as the Marsh Expert."<sup>44</sup> Though her academic achievements

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<sup>43</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 340.

<sup>44</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 341.



certainly empower her, Kya's worth and value should not be dependent on her recognition from another representation of the civilized, male-dominated world.

Thus, the dark truth that it was Kya who kills Chase Andrews and gets away with the murder because of her marsh knowledge and skills proves that recognition from society is not needed to be powerful. In fact, Owens positions Kya's murder of Chase Andrews as a necessity because of society's treatment of her as a marginalized woman. Before committing the murder, Kya asks her friend Jumpin' not to tell anyone in town, law enforcement, etc. of Chase's assault on her:

They'll take his side. They'll say I'm just stirring up trouble. Trying to get money out of his parents or something. Think about what would happen if one of the girls from Colored Town accused Chase Andrews of assault and attempted rape. They'd do nothing. Zero.<sup>45</sup>

Kya has to take matters into her own hands because a male-controlled society would not turn against one of its own for a woman, never mind an outsider. While Kya acknowledges that society mistreats the women of color in "Colored Town"—a name that denotes another mode of isolation—she falls short of recognizing the difference between her struggles as an outsider from the marsh and an outsider from "Colored Town," a shortcoming of this novel which will be discussed more in the conclusion. Tom's questioning also misses the mark of a true critique of society's wrongdoings towards Kya, but Owens's plot development and Kya's words reveal the real verdict.

Like *Circe*, *Crawdads* reflects how isolation and gaslighting are used to control and exploit women to benefit a male-dominated society. However, both Owens and Miller

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<sup>45</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 302.

move beyond just showing that the techniques used to control and demonize women today are similar to those depicted in the Anglo-American tradition of *The Odyssey*. Miller invites the sympathy of her readers by using Circe's perspectives and thoughts to not only put society's gaslighting techniques on display but also resist them because she shows that Circe is no longer mentally alone and isolated in the belief of her power and ability. In *Circe*, Helios and other men of significant power and status distance Circe from their civilization, and despite using this method in an attempt to control her and remove her as a threat, she is not weaker. Spaeth writes, "Witches, then, represent the ultimate fear of the loss of all human, or more specifically male, control over the world and of the chaos that will result from that loss of control."<sup>46</sup> Here, Spaeth recognizes the idea that in narratives, witches threaten the human, male-dominated society, and so they are exiled to lessen this threat; however, witches—and in this case Circe—do not become less powerful because of their separation from society but remain powerful or increase their power due to their reinforced connection with the natural world, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Men wanted control of women, and when women were powerful enough to threaten this accepted system of control, then the power-dynamic needed to be re-established through the isolation of those women. Circe is exiled to Aiaia because her father and other powerful men, like Zeus, believe they can weaken Circe by removing her from their

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<sup>46</sup> Barbette Stanley Spaeth, "From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and the Roman Witch in Classical Literature," in *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*, ed. Kimberly B. Stratton, and Dayna S. Kalleres (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46, Oxford Scholarship Online.

society. They attempt to re-establish their control over Circe because they choose her punishment, and they find it hard to believe, according to Miller's *Circe*, that anyone in her situation would survive the exile, never mind thrive. With Kya, who is very young when she is abandoned by her entire family, society already believes that she is weak from the start, and, therefore, no further tactics than those already built into society are needed: she won't present as a threat so long as all her time is dedicated to hunting and gathering food from the marsh to survive, her access to education is limited, and her ability to make connections with people in town is impossible because of their views of her. In Kya's case, society is under the impression that Kya will never pose a threat to their way of life, because they can control how successful she is, or so they may think.

## CHAPTER TWO: REDEFINING WITCHES' MAGICAL RELATIONSHIP TO THE NATURAL WORLD

In a review of *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Tina Jordan explains that Delia Owens found the inspiration for her novel from personal experience while isolated from human society amongst the animals, insects, and plant-life in the African Kalahari. Jordan suggests that

perhaps it's no surprise that 'Where the Crawdads Sing' — about a young girl surviving on her own in a North Carolina coastal marsh — asks, as she says, 'how isolation influences the behavior of a young woman, who, like all of us, has the genetic propensity to belong to a group'.<sup>47</sup>

Jordan's review and Owens's own words confirm that living alongside animal and insect groups in the African desert while she herself felt very isolated influenced her to write a character who is "alone, unsure, awkward around people, but strong, capable, knowledgeable, and very spunky on her own. And in the end, the confidence she gains from self-reliance in nature gives her the strength to thrive in a man's world."<sup>48</sup> Based on her own experience, Owens acknowledges what can be lost in a person from being isolated, but she also writes a character and story which shows how isolation can form strengths elsewhere, and in Owens's and Kya's case, elsewhere is the natural world.

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<sup>47</sup> Tina Jordan, "Inside the List," para. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 380.

Kya, like Circe in *Circe*, makes the switch from the human, male-controlled world to the natural world with some difficulty, as this situation is forced upon her at a very young age, though she ultimately gains a unique power from her connection with the marsh. For the first seven years of her life, Kya is slowly abandoned by each one of her family members: mom first, then all of her brothers and sisters, and then finally her demanding, alcoholic father. Living from that point on entirely on her own, Kya inhabits her family's small, run-down house on the marsh and gathers what she can from the marsh to sell for money and eat for herself. Owens evokes sympathy for Kya not only because of her isolation at an alarmingly young age, but also by calling attention to the loneliness that occurs with that switch. To fill the void of loneliness, Kya makes connections with the animals of the marsh and views her relationship to the marsh as a familial bond. Owens writes, "Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother."<sup>49</sup> Even though Kya is able to replace human bonds with her relationship to the non-human beings of the marsh, she still struggles to completely fill the void: "But just as her collection grew, so did her loneliness. A pain as large as her heart lived in her chest. Nothing eased it. Not the gulls, not a splendid sunset, not the rarest of shells."<sup>50</sup> Owens carefully paints a scene that illustrates the consequences of isolation, and how many of those who are isolated, look to nature to find a home, family, friends, and livelihood of a different kind. For many women called "witches" by society, they turn to other forms of community and places of living to be able to survive after

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<sup>49</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 146.

being excluded from civilization, like Kya. Spaeth explains that “This close connection between witches and the natural world may reflect a widespread cultural equation of women with nature.”<sup>51</sup> This association, which Spaeth calls an identification, between witches and nature stems from skillful application of their knowledge of nature, seen as magic, and the female’s bodily connection to nature. Simone De Beauvoir explains this identification:

[...] nature as a whole seems like a mother to [man]; the earth is woman, and the woman is inhabited by the same obscure forces as the earth. This is part of the reason agricultural work is entrusted to woman: able to call up the ancestral larvae within her, she also has the power to make fruit and wheat spring from the sowed fields. In both cases it is a question of a magic conjuration, not of a creative act.<sup>52</sup>

Beauvoir’s mention of “obscure forces” implies the lack of a logical explanation, to the male person, and what fills this gap in understanding is the excuse of magic.

Kya’s magic, or her unparalleled knowledge of the marsh and use of it, is best shown through her trial:

‘A minute here and there won’t do it. She would have needed twenty extra minutes. At least. How could she have saved twenty minutes?’ [...]  
‘Sheriff, isn’t it true that the waters near Barkley Cove are subjected to strong currents, riptides, and undertows that can influence the speed of a boat?’ [...]  
‘Sheriff, yes or no, do you have any evidence that a current, riptide, or strong wind occurred on the night of October 29 to the 30 that could have decreased the time for someone to boat from the Barkley Cove Harbor to the fire tower [...]?’ [...]  
‘No, I don’t.’<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Spaeth, "From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and the Roman Witch in Classical Literature," 44.

<sup>52</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 78, Google Books.

<sup>53</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 335-6.

Using a logical series of questions, Kya's lawyer convincingly leads the courthouse to the idea that it would be nearly impossible for Kya to have murdered Chase Andrews in the time frame assigned to Chase's death. In the final pages, however, Owens reveals to the readers, through a poem that Kya wrote under a different penname, that Kya did in fact kill Chase Andrews<sup>54</sup>: so, how did she save those necessary twenty minutes when there weren't any strong currents, riptides, or winds? To the average human mind represented by the jury on Kya's trial, strong currents, etc. may be the only logical way that someone could save time when traveling by water. However, these—and most—people fail to consider the possibilities which are not readily available to human logic. Occurrences that defy the boundaries of ordinary logic and scientific observation are often considered magical, miraculous, and/or spiritual. Kya's relationship with the marsh and surrounding ecosystems, which is deeper than the average person in town or even the local fisherman's knowledge of the marsh, gives her a unique ability to achieve certain things, to perform acts that seem to be magic. Though Kya's switch from the human, male-controlled world to the natural world comes with some difficulty, loneliness, and judgment, she uses her relationship with the earth, animals, and plants to thrive in the natural world.

It is exactly this power to cause unexplained events in defiance of ordinary logic which lies at the core of the historical demonization of witches: "we tend to see as their most significant characteristic the power to defy the laws of nature (levitation,

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<sup>54</sup> The poem does not explicitly state that Kya killed Chase; rather, it is implied through Tate's reaction of finding the poem, which details an insect death, and a shell necklace that Chase wore the night he was murdered.

psychokinesis, influencing the weather and other natural phenomena; the hexing of illness, accident or death; metamorphosis into animals; [...]).”<sup>55</sup> By the early modern period, as in some ways today, the Catholic Church, as well as the English Church, could be one of the most active oppressors of women, a role seen most clearly in the treatment of witches during the 1600s and the role of priests as leaders of witch hunts. However, the Church could also be a place of reprieve for women, so long as they operate within the laws and boundaries that the Church set.

Just as there was a place for women in the Church as long as the norms for that community was followed, there was also a place for acts which defied nature; miracles are described in this way: “the practice of such animistic miracles by laypeople, especially women who, according to long tradition, seemed predestined to it ever since antiquity. The miracle—in this case healing—had to take place in the name of God.”<sup>56</sup> According to Silvia Bovenschen et al., religious authorities felt threatened by the connection that women, specifically, had with the natural world, and they had to reinstate masculine supremacy at every angle. Thus, there is a long history of men replacing magical women: “the *one* Christian God” replacing the mother goddesses and sorcerers replacing sorceresses. Spaeth notes, “Literary portraits of male practitioners of magic in

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<sup>55</sup> Silvia Bovenschen, Jeannine Blackwell, Johanna Moore, and Beth Weckmueller, “The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature,” in *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* no.15 (1978): 97, doi:10.2307/487908.

<sup>56</sup> Silvia Bovenschen, Jeannine Blackwell, Johanna Moore, and Beth Weckmueller, “The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature,” 97.



Latin literature and also in Greek literature from the Empire are in general far more positive than those of female ones. [...].”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the root of the problem with witches and miracles of nature is not the plants, nor the animals, nor the insects, but women’s relationship to this other sphere of life, specifically.

Women’s relationship to nature is likewise at issue in the Anglo-American translations of Homer. In *The Odyssey*, Fagles and Fitzgerald do not go into much detail about how or from what Circe makes her potions for her enchantments, perhaps to prevent a connection between Circe and nature, but across two translations, they are described by Fagles as “wicked drugs<sup>58</sup>” or Fitzgerald as “drug[s] of evil.”<sup>59</sup> According to Spaeth,

[T]he tools of the witch, particularly the ingredients she needs for her magic potions, come from nature; indeed their location in the natural world is consistently emphasized in the literary sources. Witches’ potions contain potent herbs, which must be gathered on mountaintops at the dead of night.<sup>60</sup>

Spaeth’s words imply that because of the conceptions about witches which already exist, Fagles and Fitzgerald do not need to detail what the potions are made of and it can be assumed that the potions are made from plants. To add to the terror, the image of witches gathering their plants in the middle of the night is added to this conception of witches’

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<sup>57</sup> Spaeth, "From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and the Roman Witch in Classical Literature," 52.

<sup>58</sup> Fagles, X, 259.

<sup>59</sup> Fitzgerald, X, 232.

<sup>60</sup> Spaeth, "From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and the Roman Witch in Classical Literature," 43.

brews. Again, though, the plants are not to blame; the women and how they gather or use the plants are.

This double standard is made clear when, in *The Odyssey*, the male god Hermes presents a plant with the power to resist Circe's magic to Odysseus; it is simply a "magic herb"<sup>61</sup> with no implied negative connotation, just a symbol of power and potency. This exemplifies "[an] author portray[ing] these male magicians as using their magic for good rather than evil."<sup>62</sup> Even though the translator's diction does not connote positivity, *the use* of the plant does. Because *The Odyssey* works towards its male protagonist's goal of returning home to society and his kingdom, Hermes's magic herb is being used for good, as it will help counteract Circe's evil drugs. Fagles's translation activates the Anglo-American religious and antifeminist belief that men practicing magic or performing miracles is legitimate, as it functions within a society built around the aims and needs of men, while women practicing magic or performing miracles is illegitimate.

The power and magic of witches are made illegitimate by portraying them as evil, uncontrollable, and wild. Spaeth writes that women and witches are often identified with nature due to "be[ing] found out in the wild" and "be[ing] described as savage animals themselves."<sup>63</sup> She catalogs the different ways that some authors have related witches to animals:

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<sup>61</sup> Fagles, X, 323.

<sup>62</sup> Spaeth, "From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and the Roman Witch in Classical Literature," 52.

<sup>63</sup> Spaeth, "From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and the Roman Witch in Classical Literature," 45.

[...] Witches are frequently compared to savage animals or animal-like monsters, as Euripides (Med. 92, 187–89, 1342–43, 1407) and Seneca (Med. 407–8, 863–65) compare Medea in her wrath to a bull, lioness, tigress, and the monsters Scylla and Charybdis. Some witches look or sound like wild animals: Horace's Canidia wears serpents in her hair (Epod. 5.15–16), while his Sagana has hair like a sea-urchin or a raging boar (Epod. 5.25–28);[...] Finally, some witches even behave like savage animals: Canidia and Sagana dig at the earth with their nails and tear a lamb to pieces with their bare teeth (Hor. Sat. 1.8.26–27); Erictho eats human corpses and tears into living flesh with her teeth and nails (Luc. 6.533–68).<sup>64</sup>

Homer's writing of Circe also falls within this catalog of women with close relationships to animals, as Circe has animals for companions around her home. These animals add to her ferocity. Fagles translates, "So they came nuzzling round my men —lions, wolves / with big powerful claws —and the men cringed in fear / at the sight of those strange, ferocious beasts."<sup>65</sup> Fitzgerald briefly echoes, "Humbly those wolves and lions with mighty paws/ fawned on our men—who met their yellow eyes and feared them."<sup>66</sup> Both translations move from using words like "nuzzling" and "fawned on," describing their actions as harmless and even loving, to stating the men's fear for the "strange, ferocious beasts." These translations imply that regardless of how the animals acted, they are scary and dangerous nonetheless, perhaps because they are "strange" by living and "ferocious" by acting outside of society's boundaries.

Animals also come into play in the Circe myth when Circe transforms the men into pigs. Circe's power to transform Odysseus's men into animals is portrayed as especially

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<sup>64</sup> Spaeth, "From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and the Roman Witch in Classical Literature," 44.

<sup>65</sup> Fagles, X, 238-40.

<sup>66</sup> Fitzgerald, X, 237-9.

horrifying in *The Odyssey* because it not only delays the hero from reaching home, but it also turns the men into less powerful and less civilized beings. Fagles writes, “Once they’d drained the bowls she filled, suddenly / she struck with her wand, drove them into her pigsties, / all of them bristling into swine —with grunts, / snouts —even their bodies, yes, and only / the men’s minds stayed steadfast as before,”<sup>67</sup> and Fitzgerald’s translation resonates, ending with “though minds were still unchanged” instead.<sup>68</sup> Having the mind of a man, associated with logic and rationality, in an animal’s body would be terrifying to the men, for they would have the knowledge that they have become exactly what they feared. However, even in Fagles and Fitzgerald’s translations of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus’s men are known, even to Odysseus, to behave without inhibitions. In fact, when Odysseus spots Circe’s home, he decides that it is important that he feeds his men *before* he sends them to scout out Circe’s home. Odysseus is trying to satiate the men’s appetites, expecting that they will be better behaved if fed. Homer’s translators provide only a brief inclination that the men might be wilder in their mind and actions than otherwise indicated in the rest of the chapter.

*The Odyssey* only hints at the possibility of Circe revealing the men’s true character through their transformation; *Crawdads* and *Circe* more explicitly make this statement through their versions of the Circe tale. Kya, though she does not talk about having the powers of transformation, performs an act of transformation on Chase. The town sees Chase as a golden boy:

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<sup>67</sup> Fagles, X, 261-5.

<sup>68</sup> Fitzgerald, X, 265.

They had known him since he was born. Had watched his life ease from charming child to cute teen; star quarterback and town hot shot to working for his parents. Finally, handsome man wedding the prettiest girl. Now, he sprawled alone, less dignified than the slough.<sup>69</sup>

Kya, the person who put Chase there by pushing him off the water tower ledge, causes his physical image to change as he dies there in the mud of the marsh. According to the traditional telling of Circe's feats of transformation, the transformed person would have an outside which does not match their insides. Warner's analysis of a different story of transformation by an enchantress provides an explanation for how Owens defies the traditional telling: "the men's metamorphoses body forth their inner natures; they are not degraded to the condition of beasts but exposed as being beastly within."<sup>70</sup> Chase's body in the mud conjures images of pigs, the animal of Circe's choice. Like Warner explains, the outside depiction of the character is not opposite of their internal character; rather, Kya reveals to society, through Chase's death, what kind of a monster he truly was.

The mysterious circumstances surrounding Chase's death causes townsfolk and detectives to dig beyond Chase's charming outer image into how he spent his time and how he treated others. Owens makes visible how the townspeople, representative of the larger society, work through this process of transformation. Kya's trial shows how the townspeople's resistance to seeing Chase's true character closely relates to how *The Odyssey* connotes Circe's transformation of the men. The narrative focuses on Circe's evilness instead of critically analyzing the actions of Odysseus's men and readers of *The*

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<sup>69</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 24-5.

<sup>70</sup> Marina Warner, "The Enchantments of Circe," *Raritan* 17, no. 1 (1997): para. 29. MLA International Bibliography with Full Text.

*Odyssey* can buy into that, perpetuating the idea that Circe, or Kya, is the one to blame. Owens portrays this perspective through the townsfolk, but by giving more of Kya's perspective and the struggles she faces as a woman, *Crawdads*'s readers are able to see Chase for the monster that he is. *The Odyssey* and the archetype of the witch set up the women-to-nature and men-to-society association. The relationship between women and the non-human living world is seen as magical, wild, and uncontrollable; in contrast, the relationship between men and culture is seen as logical, controlled, and powerful. The depiction of witches in nature as magical, wild, and uncontrollable is an attempt to discredit the power, intelligence, and efforts of these women, and *Crawdads* troubles this attempt at discrediting powerful women by showing how Kya's powers are more rooted in an understanding of this living world beyond human beings that not many people have or care about than in a magical predisposition that women have with nature.

Miller's choice to write *Circe* entirely from Circe's point of view also provides readers with new perspectives and insights into Circe's powers, and she shows just how logical and controlled Circe's powers actually are. First, she discovers her strengths:

My powers lapped upon themselves like waves. I found I had a knack for illusion, summoning shadow crumbs for the mice to creep after, making pale minnows leap from the waves beneath a cormorant's beak. I thought larger: a ferret to frighten off the moles, an owl to keep away the rabbits. I learned that the best time to harvest was beneath the moon, when dew and darkness concentrated sap. I learned what grew well in a garden, and what must be left to its place in the woods.<sup>71</sup>

Each "I" statement shows the command Circe has over her growing power and knowledge. Circe's choice of verbs—"thought," "learned," "found"—imply a process of

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<sup>71</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 86.

generating knowledge through hypothesis, observation, and conclusion. Her findings all come from a logical trajectory of ideas. Circe's powers, as Miller conveys them, are not evil, uncontrollable, and wild, and especially not for Circe herself. She uses her powers and knowledge to help herself given her observations, as is the case with the ferret being used to frighten the moles.

Miller also addresses the misconception that her powers are uncontrollable or wild: "There I discovered at last the limits of my power. However potent the mixture, however well woven the spell, the toad kept trying to fly, and the mouse to sting. Transformation touched only bodies, not minds."<sup>72</sup> Someone who is conscious of the limits of their powers does not use them wildly; instead, they use them deliberately. *The Odyssey*, according to Fagles and Fitzgerald's translations, portray Circe as evil right from the start and do not give a reason for the transformation of Odysseus's men. In their minds, Circe's power is not only illegitimate for being uncontrolled, unreasonable, and wild but also fearful. Miller, on the other hand, suggests that these powers come from spending a lot of time testing hypotheses and observing the effects while immersed in nature.<sup>73</sup> If Circe had not been exiled to Aiaia, it is not clear whether she would have had access to enough plants, herbs, and space to build her powers. Away from society, Circe is able to strengthen herself against it, an outcome not thoroughly considered by those who exiled her. Hermes says to Circe, "Zeus wanted you contained, and so you are. They

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<sup>72</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 86.

<sup>73</sup> This portrayal also means that when Circe transforms Odysseus's men, she knows exactly what she is doing and it is not because she is, as a whole, evil. This will be explored more in the next chapter.

didn't really think about it further."<sup>74</sup> Perhaps, another way to say the second sentence is that they didn't really think that she would stand a chance. Miller's Circe develops her abilities and along with it a confidence that she lacked in the male-dominated society of immortals. Like Owens said of Kya, her isolation in the marsh causes her to gain the confidence to thrive in a man's world. Circe speaks with her new confidence to those who oppose her: "You threw me to the crows, but it turns out I prefer them to you. No answer came, and none from my aunt Moon either, those cowards. My skin was glowing, my teeth set. My lioness lashed her tail. *Does no one have the courage? Will no one dare to face me?*"<sup>75</sup> Miller takes a narrative which critiqued Circe for her cruel and wild powers and reclaims her figure for a feminist perspective of Circe as a powerful, capable, and knowledgeable woman.

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<sup>74</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 92.

<sup>75</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 89.



## CHAPTER THREE: SEXUALITY

Strongly tied to women's identification with nature is the female body, and Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies call out the ways in which patriarchal structures inflict violence on both the environment and the female body:

We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way.<sup>76</sup>

Federici takes this idea and applies it to the demonization and sexualization of witches, in particular. She writes that women have to be "sexless, obedient, submissive, resigned to subordination to the male world"<sup>77</sup> to be accepted in a society ruled by this masculinist mentality and that

outside these parameters, outside of marriage, procreation, and male/institutional control, [...] female sexuality has historically represented a social danger, a threat to the discipline of work, a power over others, and an obstacle to the maintenance of social hierarchies and class relations.<sup>78</sup>

If women's bodies are associated with fertility and agriculture, or nature more broadly, then procreation becomes the focus of society as a means of self-propagation. Sexuality

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<sup>76</sup> Shiva Vandana and Maria Mies. *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 14.

<sup>77</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 60.

<sup>78</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 57.

outside of the bounds of procreation becomes wild, uncontrollable, and evil. Circe herself is one of the most prominent literary examples of a woman whose sexuality is depicted as evil and fearful. Federici mentions the Circe myth in her explanation of the demonization of women's sexuality: "the fear of women's uncontrolled sexuality explains the popularity in the demonologies of the myth of Circe, the legendary enchantress who by her magical arts transformed the men lusting after her into animals."<sup>79</sup>

As Federici mentions, the myth of Circe's is popular and has led to many retellings of her story, many of which perpetuate the depiction of Circe as an evil temptress. Based on Fagles and Fitzgerald's translations of *The Odyssey*, Circe's descriptions are limited mainly to her effect on their senses, mainly auditory with some visual elements, developing her as sensuality. Warner zeroes in Circe's voice at the heart of her label as temptress: "Audeessa, human-voiced, is her defining epithet, and unique to Circe in the Homeric lexicon [...] She does not make a visible entrance into this mind picture: she is conjured up [...] as a sound."<sup>80</sup> Fagles's translation chooses descriptors such as "nymph with lovely braids," "who can speak with human voice," "spellbinding voice as she glided back and forth," and "she sings—enthraling!"<sup>81</sup> Fitzgerald portrays her voice and sensuality similarly, using phrases like "dire beauty and divine," "beguiling voice," and "singing a pretty song." The words "spellbinding," "enthraling," and "beguiling" suggest

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<sup>79</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 58.

<sup>80</sup> Marina Warner, "The Enchantments of Circe," para. 8.

<sup>81</sup> Fagles, X, 149, 150, 243, and 249.

a magnetic kind of attraction emanating from Circe's appearance and voice.<sup>82</sup> This attraction is not explicitly connected to sexuality until Hermes advises Odysseus to be wary of going to Circe's bed for fear that she will "unman" him.<sup>83</sup> Further, the translations imply that Circe's enticements keep Odysseus and his men on the island of Aiaia; for Odysseus, his enticement is Circe's "luxurious"<sup>84</sup> or "flawless"<sup>85</sup> bed. This trance or "madness,"<sup>86</sup> Homer reveals, is an evil, for it has caused Odysseus to forget his home and his "well-built house"<sup>87</sup> in Ithaca. Homer's telling of the Circe myth follows Federici's insights on the witch hunts of the Inquisition: "Here too, beneath the fantastic charge of copulation with the Devil, we find the fear that women could bewitch men with their 'glamour,' bring them under their power, and inspire in them such desire as to cause them to forget all social distances and obligations."<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, Warner views Homer's depiction of Circe and her bed as "representative of temptation, unruliness, and decadence,"<sup>89</sup> which stands in direct contrast to the laws and society of Ithaca. Circe's tempting bed is also to blame for unmanning Odysseus,

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<sup>82</sup> Fitzgerald, X, 150, 244, 250.

<sup>83</sup> Fagles, X, 334; Fitzgerald, X, 340.

<sup>84</sup> Fagles, X, 529.

<sup>85</sup> Fitzgerald, X, 530.

<sup>86</sup> Fagles, X, 520.

<sup>87</sup> Fagles, X, 523.

<sup>88</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 58.

<sup>89</sup> Warner, "The Enchantments of Circe," para. 17.

something that he feared and that the gods feared too based on Hermes's warning. The focus of this chapter is entirely on Odysseus and his men's feelings as a result of Circe. Warner comments on this as well: "The Homeric adjectives—the recurrent stress of baneful, evil, characterizing Circe's works, the weeping and laments of the men in her vicinity—push hard in the narrative to convince the hearer/reader of the horrors of Circe's sorcery."<sup>90</sup> Warner points out that Circe's monstrosity often arises as a result of men's pain,<sup>91</sup> and her entire chapter sympathizes with Odysseus and his men and emphasizes Circe's monstrosity as a temptress from the start.

Circe's "beguiling" voice and beautiful appearance paint Circe as a temptress witch and justify Odysseus's men's encroachment on her house as if they were led there in a trance. *Circe*, using contemporary insights, illustrates how misguided this criticism of Circe is. Circe herself narrates her perspective of when Odysseus's men enter her home. At first, she details how they call her goddess, but then, thanks to her human-like voice, they notice her vulnerability and start to call her names like "sweet."<sup>92</sup> Circe notices how the mood in the room shifts significantly when she answers that the house is hers alone after she responds that she has no husband and no father at home for them to thank. From that moment on she can feel their presence: "I could feel their twenty bodies filling up the space behind me."<sup>93</sup> She continues to recount every move that the men, and specifically

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<sup>90</sup> Warner, "The Enchantments of Circe," para. 14.

<sup>91</sup> Warner, "The Enchantments of Circe," para. 1.

<sup>92</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 185.

<sup>93</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 186.

the captain, make. Though her thoughts display extreme discomfort, she tries to talk herself out of the fear that she feels: “The captain stepped towards me. He was taller than I was, every sinew taut from labor. I thought—what? That I was being foolish. That something else would happen. That I had drunk too much of my own wine, and this was the fear it conjured.”<sup>94</sup> Moments later, Circe is raped by the captain, and after the immediate shock, she turns them all into pigs. Miller’s telling of this moment in the Circe myth flips Homer’s sympathy and demonization around so that Circe receives the sympathy and the men are seen as monsters. Not only this, but the shift in perspective reveals that there is no justification for the men’s arrival at Circe’s home. Because of men’s power in society, with women being the “second sex” since antiquity, the sheer number of men versus women in this mythical scenario is alarming.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, the idea that the men were lured to her house and then are the victims strongly depicts the kind of victim-blaming today used against women in sexual assault cases.

Kathryn E. Frazier explores how women in contemporary society have internalized such a contradictory view of female sexuality: be sexual, but if you are, you’re “asking for it.”<sup>96</sup> Even though *The Odyssey* does not mention any sexual violence against Circe,

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<sup>94</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 187.

<sup>95</sup> Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 88. Beauvoir discusses how the view of women as the “second sex” grew, in part, out of ancient Greece: “the ancient Greek philosophy [...] showed that alterity is the same as negation, thus Evil. [...] By the time humankind reaches the stage of writing its mythology and laws, patriarchy is established: it is males who write the codes. It is natural for them to give woman a subordinate.”

<sup>96</sup> Kathryn E. Frazier, “‘Up for it’ or ‘Asking for it’? Violence Against Women in the Age of Postfeminism,” *Feminism & Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2021): 404-423. doi:10.1177/0959353520963975.

there is a clear power imbalance given women's position in society and the number of men in Circe's house. Miller's *Circe* points out that this is a problem—that their sudden entrance into Circe's home is more of an uncivilized act than Fagles's and Fitzgerald's translations of *The Odyssey* indicate. *Circe*, however, goes beyond just pointing this out. Additionally, because Fagles's and Fitzgerald's translations name Circe's witchcraft as "evil" and "wicked" even before the men are turned, they imply that Circe and her potions are evil simply by existing. The contemporary novel suggests that Circe does not just turn Odysseus's men into pigs because she is, at her core, evil and acting out of that; rather, she does so out of self-defense. Even though Circe's story is a myth, there is room and almost a necessity to present a woman's perspective because this perspective was minimally present in the literary archive during ancient Greece and for much of literary history across many societies.

This argument, while it is not explicit in Homer, follows an accepted practice of working with partial archives. Saidiya Hartman, for example, contributes to this practice by reckoning with the absence of certain perspectives, specifically enslaved women of color, from the archive and how sexual violence against these women surround these missing stories of the archive. She explains how she negotiates the limits of the archive:

[b]y playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2 (2008): 12.

This process which she describes is “critical fabulation” and leads to “a ‘recombinant narrative,’ which ‘loops the strands’ of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl’s story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present.”<sup>98</sup> Through “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman reveals a strategy for writers to trouble the accepted historical narratives and imagine various pathways and time periods for excluded perspectives to emerge. Miller appears to explore a similar technique with *Circe*, as she contests the accepted myth of Circe as an evil temptress and imagines new narrative possibilities, incorporating the concepts and experiences of different times. As a result, Miller invites readers to doubt Circe’s label of an evil temptress by incorporating into Circe’s story a horrific occurrence which women have faced and continue to face as a result of their position and sexualization in a male-dominated world.

*The Odyssey* seems to present one perspective and *Circe* another, or rather, the inverse of the former. *Crawdads* is able to express both. Like Homer’s descriptions of Circe in *The Odyssey*, Kya is sexualized by others and also portrayed as having a kind of magnetic quality about her which drew others to her and her home. When the detectives discover just how close Kya and Chase had been, one of them expresses surprise that Chase would be with the Marsh Girl, to which the other detective responds, “You seen her lately? She’s not a girl anymore, probably mid-twenties and a real looker.”<sup>99</sup> In this brief conversation between the detectives, the convincing factor for why they would have any kind of relationship at all is her perceived beauty—not her intelligence, skills, humor,

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<sup>98</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12.

<sup>99</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 172.

etc. The detectives, and most of the people in town, can only understand someone wanting to be with the strange excluded young woman because of her appearance.

For some, looks can help them overcome their distaste for outsiders, and for others, looks paired with the strangeness of someone being an outsider, different, or wild makes that individual exotic. Chase, specifically, exoticizes Kya and fails to see her as a human being, who has feelings and is worthy of respect. While talking with his male friends in town, he shares, “Yeah she’s wild as a she-fox in a snare. Just what you’d expect from a marsh minx. Worth every bit a’ the gas money.”<sup>100</sup> Again, animal imagery is used to describe a Circe-like character. Later, while Kya defends herself from his unwanted sexual aggressions, Chase remarks, “There’s my lynx. Wilder than ever.”<sup>101</sup> This wildness is linked to sexual prowess, and Chase’s dehumanizing language “reduces the victim to a non-person... [and] denies the victim the specificity of [her or his] own being.”<sup>102</sup> In Chase’s denial of Kya’s being and humanity, he places his ownership and his possession with the word “my.” During his aggression, Chase’s language is littered with possession: “I’m not lettin’ ya go this time. Like it or not, you’re mine.”<sup>103</sup> Chase is driven by his desire to be the one to control this wild woman, and when she denies him, he tries even harder to establish his power.

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<sup>100</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 199.

<sup>101</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 264.

<sup>102</sup> Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>103</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 265.



Chase, and other people in the greater society, think that women's sexuality warrants any kind of sexual advance: "[Kya] wasn't sure what the two fishermen had seen, but they'd never defend her. They'd say she had it coming because, before Chase left her, she'd been smooching with him for years, behaving unladylike. *Actin' the ho*, they'd say."<sup>104</sup> Again, the subjectivity of the victim, in this case a woman, is denied. In the minds of patriarchal society, it is unfathomable that a woman could choose to be sexual in one instance and not in another because, per Federici, "the repression of female desire was placed at the service of utilitarian goals such as the satisfaction of men's sexual needs and more importantly the procreation of an abundant workforce."<sup>105</sup> If sexuality occurred outside of these boundaries, satisfying men or procreation, then any sexual activity would be seen as promiscuous or lewd behavior. Federici explains further, "And, indeed, of no crime were 'witches' as frequently accused as 'lewd behavior,' generally associated with infanticide and an inherent hostility to the reproduction of life."<sup>106</sup> Any disruption of these expectations and boundaries for women to follow with their sexuality is considered a crime, and one which earned women the title of witches. Society does not want to acknowledge women's choice because they fear the power that comes with women's control over their own bodies and their sexual

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<sup>104</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 271.

<sup>105</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 56.

<sup>106</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 57.

encounters: “female sexuality was both seen as a social threat and, if properly channeled, a powerful economic force.”<sup>107</sup>

Both *Circe* and *Crawdads* disrupt the patriarchy’s rigid construction of female sexuality, which focuses on male desires and gains, by showing how their powerful protagonists fight back in a variety of ways against sexual violence, choose for themselves when they want to be sexual, and provide their point of view and subjectivity. In *Circe*, when the captain rapes Circe, she is unable to speak her spell right away because of the physical violence. Afterward, however, she reflects on how she has changed the spell she was originally going to cast and changes the men to pigs. Then, she concludes, “As it turned out, I did kill pigs that night after all.”<sup>108</sup> Like Kya, Circe kills the perpetrators of sexual violence against her. Her words imply that she normally didn’t do this, which means that the men’s actions required this reaction and transforming them was not done out of inherent evilness. As Carissa Harris would put it, Circe “[exacts] a brutal form of extralegal justice for rape” and “challenge[s] the myth that rape is a trivial event for its victims.”<sup>109</sup> Those in power in society would not care, and, as Kya explains while talking to Jumpin’, they would not believe her either. This indifference is shown through the very myth of Circe herself as the temptress or the villain and readers of *The*

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<sup>107</sup> Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 54.

<sup>108</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 189.

<sup>109</sup> Carissa Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 287, iBooks.

*Odyssey* failing to acknowledge the danger of twenty men entering her home. Therefore, these women enact their own justice and to the extent that they feel harmed.

Once the fate of these men is known, Circe cleans her house to the point that she feels she must “Tear down [...]. Tear down and build again.”<sup>110</sup> Combined with the enacted justice, the fact that Circe feels she needs to completely tear down her house and herself to start anew strongly reflects the physical and emotional impact that rape has on its survivors. Miller is able to make this stage very visible from Circe’s perspective. The impact that rape can have on a person’s sexuality is varied, and different people naturally react in different ways; as Harris points out, “this diversity is valuable because it allows readers to see rape not as following a single narrative, a predictable script.”<sup>111</sup> In response to more men arriving at her island, Circe would analyze the behavior of the men and decide what to do. She recounts,

“A few of these, so few I can count them on my fingers, I let go.[...] They were pious men, honestly lost, and I would feed them, and if there was a handsome one among them I might take him to bed. It was not desire, [...] I did it to prove my skin was still my own.”<sup>112</sup>

With these acts of sexuality, Circe tries to reclaim the choice for her own body.

Miller rewrites the Circe myth to put power back into Circe’s hands. Though she does take Odysseus to her bed, like in *The Odyssey*, she is the one to propose it and not as

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<sup>110</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 192.

<sup>111</sup> Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain*, 267.

<sup>112</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 193.

a result of a show of authority by Odysseus, as *The Odyssey* translations indicate. For example, Fagles writes,

She screamed, slid under my blade, hugged my knees/ with a flood of warm tears  
and a burst of winging words:/ ‘Who are you? Where are you from? Your city?  
Your parents?/ I’m wonderstruck —you drank my drugs, you’re not bewitched!/  
Never has any other man withstood my potion, never,/ once it’s past his lips and  
he has drunk it down./ You have a mind in you no magic can enchant!’<sup>113</sup>

In Fagles’s rendition, Circe succumbs to Odysseus’s show of power from his blade, citing that he “withstood” her potion and has a mind stronger than her potions, and then suggests that they go to bed together. Miller’s version gives Circe the right to choose, and she does choose to offer her bed to him. Because Circe’s subjectivity is provided, readers can see a romantic curiosity develop throughout their conversation. At one point, Circe mentions, “My name in his mouth. It sparked a feeling in me, sharp and eager. He was like ocean tides indeed, I thought. You could look up, and the shore would be gone.”<sup>114</sup> Thus, Miller explores Circe fighting to gain the power of choice back, which every person should have.

Though Kya also faces a situation of sexual violence, her reaction is a little different. While discussing the depictions of sexual coercion in pastourelles, Harris argues that “the pastourelles depict powerful, well-off men targeting women who are young, poor, single, and alone, leveraging the women’s multiple disadvantages to coerce

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<sup>113</sup> Fagles, X, 359-65.

<sup>114</sup> Miller, *Circe*, 203; it should also be noted that Circe could think or say these things and still choose to not have sex with Odysseus.

them and illustrating how perpetrators can exploit structural inequalities [...].”<sup>115</sup> To illustrate her point, Harris guides readers through a Middle English pastourelle:

[T]he milkmaid issues an unequivocal sexual refusal and makes a declaration of agency [...]. He finally agrees to release her, but he follows his capitulation by threatening future violence, reminding her that she will never be safe. [...] He ties her vulnerability directly to her job as a dairy worker; the next time she goes to work, she must fear his attack. She can protect herself by refusing to perform her job and thus lose her means of economic survival, or she can go to work and expect that she will be raped.<sup>116</sup>

Harris’s analysis of the pastourelle demonstrates how powerful, upper-class men historically have used women’s social and economic disadvantages for their own purposes.

In *Crawdads*, the situation which Harris describes is exactly what Kya fears after she defends herself against Chase’s attempted rape. She works through her physical recovery of the assault by staying away from those few people who care about her and taking refuge in the place that has always been her home: the marsh. However, Kya is unable to find security in the marsh like usual because she knows that Chase is still out there, knows how important the marsh is to her emotionally and economically, and is angry. Owens writes, “After a few days, she boated into the marsh, exploring areas Chase wouldn’t know, but was jumpy and alert, making it difficult to paint. [...] wherever she went, mapped an escape route in her mind.”<sup>117</sup> Kya uses her observations of situations

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<sup>115</sup> Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain*, 266.

<sup>116</sup> Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain*, 269-70.

<sup>117</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 274.

like this in her own life, with her father and mother, and her study of ecology to conclude that “these men had to have the last punch. [...] As Pa would have it, Kya had to be taught a lesson.”<sup>118</sup> To Kya, this meant confronting Chase in some way or living the rest of her life in fear. Like Circe, Kya enacts her own justice. The reasoning for why Kya kills Chase seems to be different than Circe, but both are reactions to an act of violence against them. Through Kya’s perspective, readers are exposed to the kind of fear that permeates someone’s life after an event like this, and through the trial, readers see just how resistant society is to believing women and stopping violence against women. Both of these retellings show that

many facets of rape culture—victim blaming, treating silence as consent, refusing to heed women’s refusals, trivializing rape’s impact on survivors, and assuming that unaccompanied women are legitimate targets of men’s sexual attention—remain largely unchanged.<sup>119</sup>

Miller and Owen reverse the demonization of witches and women for their sexuality, and they expose society and men as the true villains for employing violent tactics to reduce the power of women time and time again. Applying what Harris says of the pastourelles to Miller and Owen’s retellings of the Circe myth, “in light of the vast and ongoing problem of sexual violence in our own culture, it is imperative that we listen to them.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 283.

<sup>119</sup> Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain*, 279.

<sup>120</sup> Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain*, 280.

## CONCLUSION

*Circe* and *Crawdads* were two of the most popular books in 2018, the year of their release. Their popularity may have been due to many factors, but I argue that because of their adjustments to the Circe myth, they have made the Circe myth—and, through it, the witch archetype in general—more accessible and inclusive, which can appeal to today’s contemporary audience. Until the twentieth century, the male-authored texts and translations—depicting male fears, desires, and narratives while demonizing witches—were the only perspectives able to contribute to the Anglo-American image of Circe. Though their shift from these perspectives to one that illustrates their female protagonist’s struggles—such as isolation, gaslighting, demonization, and violence—and strengths—like their ability to adjust and form new connections, knowledge of their own skills, and bravery to do what is necessary to protect themselves in a world built by and for men—the Circe myth is reclaimed for a feminist interpretation. Inasmuch as contemporary audiences now favor stories about smart and strong women, these versions of Circe give them just that. The critique of popular texts or “accessible” texts like Emily Wilson’s translation of *The Odyssey* are then seen, by contrast, as attempts to gatekeep and continue to exclude women from certain information and success. The tactic used in *The Odyssey* translations and its adaptations by the male characters to exclude women viewed as a threat is also a method wielded by the academic community of men who exclusively held the right way to talk about and read this story.

Despite this feminist reclamation of Circe, *Circe* and *Crawdads* do not deliver on a fully inclusive reading on her, as they largely do not address the struggles and strengths of other groups previously left out of the intended audience. For example, both Circe and Kya are privileged in their own way: Kya is white and Circe is presumed to be white. While they may experience some of the same oppressive factors as women of color, these white women authors essentialize gender, and there are ways in which women of color experience oppression which are not represented in these texts. Additionally, these texts, and my analysis of them, operate within the goals of second-wave feminism and its reliance on gender essentialism. *Circe* and *Crawdads* may not relate to or reflect the struggles and strengths of readers who do not identify within the confines of the gender binary.

*Circe* partly addresses the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in the novel by queering the idea of a heterosexual couple as parents—Circe raises her child alone—and by choosing an unconventional partner at the end of the novel; *Crawdads* slightly explores the ways in which the Black community has been oppressed and excluded through the character of Jumpin'. Owens acknowledges this part of her book,

I think it would be very difficult to write a novel based in the 1950s and '60s about a young white woman who is befriended and protected by an older African American man and not touch on racism. [...] I tried very hard to let the story itself speak of the issues and to keep my personal opinions low-key.<sup>121</sup>

Based on her own words, it seems as though Owens felt it was necessary to include the Black community in her novel in order to accurately depict the time in history of her

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<sup>121</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 382.



story, but her words indicate that it was not a goal of hers to accurately depict and transform the struggles of the Black community. Given that Miller and Owens are both white women, depicting Circe or Kya as a Black woman would be pretending to know what it is like to be a Black woman; therefore, there must be other ways for these texts to be truly inclusive of other marginalized groups of people. All this is to say that *Circe* and *Crawdads* open the gates of this myth up a little wider than they were previously, by reclaiming Circe for a twenty-first century world view, but a short four years later, these works fall short in terms of their inclusivity.

Even though these texts have not moved yet to a more intersectional approach, the second-wave feminist concerns they do address are still important. Women are still seen as the “second sex,” and are thus disadvantaged in this male dominated world and often treated as less than human; the concerns which brought about this particular wave of feminism have not yet been resolved, and these texts make that explicit, both in relation to the times in which they were set and in relation to the time in which they were released. At their core, these texts inspire readers to look at how society treats women and they interrogate the ways in which we continue to prevent them from being the powerful human beings they are.

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