Circe (Greek mythology)

Definition: Circe from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(sûr'sē), in Greek mythology, enchantress; daughter of Helios. She lived on an island, where she decoyed sailors and treacherously changed them into beasts. According to the *Odyssey*, she changed the companions of Odysseus into swine, but with the aid of Hermes, Odysseus forced her to break the spell. In post-Homeric legend she bore Odysseus a son, Telegonus, who unwillingly killed his father.

Summary Article: CIRCE

From Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology

Circe is best known from Homer's *Odyssey*, in which she plays a leading role in one of Odysseus's most important adventures. She is immortal and inhabits an island somewhere in the distant ocean, where she lives alone except for her magic servants and tame wild animals, lions and wolves that fawn on her like dogs. These are actually men she has magically transformed.

When Odysseus and his men landed on Circe's island, the enchantress received them kindly, but the food she served was laced with a drug that made them drowsy. Once it had taken effect, she struck the men with a rod and turned them all into pigs, except for Odysseus. He would have suffered the same fate, too, had the god Hermes not met him previously and given him the moly plant (a species of lily), which protected him from Circe's spells.

Because Odysseus could resist Circe, she recognized him as the hero who she had been told by an earlier prophecy would one day come to her. She turned his men back into human shape, younger and more handsome than before, and became Odysseus's friend and lover.

The men stayed with Circe for a year. She told them that they must visit the land of the dead, and when they went there Odysseus was given a prophecy of his own death. They then returned to Circe for further instructions. She told them to depart, but not before warning them of the dangers of the journey ahead. In particular, she told them not to kill the cattle of the sun god, Helios, which lived on the island of Thrinacia. As it turned out, only Odysseus was resolute enough to heed her warning, and consequently he was the only member of the crew to complete the journey.

Circe also features in the story of Jason and the Argonauts. According to Apollonius of Rhodes, when the *Argo* came to Circe's island, Circe anointed Jason and Medea with pig's blood so that they could atone for their theft of the Golden Fleece. Medea and Circe were close relatives—they were both descended from Helios. The daughters and granddaughters of Helios were dangerous women; another was Pasiphae, mother of the Minotaur.

In a later version of the Circe myth, Odysseus left the enchantress pregnant. When their son, Telegonus, grew up, he went in search of his father. He came by chance to Ithaca, and, not knowing where he was, raided the island. Odysseus rushed to fight him off. Telegonus, unaware that this threatening figure was his own father, killed him. This fulfilled the prophecy made to Odysseus in the underworld that his death would come from the sea. Telegonus then married Penelope; he and his half-brother Telemachus took Penelope with them back to Circe's island, where Telemachus married Circe.

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Circe then made the three of them immortal.

Comparable figures
Some scholars have seen in Circe a version of the forest witch familiar from Indo-European folktales such as the story of Hansel and Gretel. Others have suggested that Circe shares characteristics with the West Asian "Mistress of Animals," who has various names, including Ishtar, Lillith, and Anat. The name Circe means "hawk" in Greek, and the comparable West Asian goddesses are often depicted with the wings of hawks or associated with other birds of prey. In the Epic of Gilgamesh there are further parallels between Circe and Ishtar, the fertility goddess of the Assyrians and Babylonians: Both can control wild animals; their characters have a dangerous side connected to sexuality and magic; and they both ultimately turn from a threat into a helper. Ishtar turns her lovers into wild animals by striking them with a rod. She also sends her husband down into the underworld. These similarities can hardly be coincidental—the myths of the two deities are interdependent, and possibly come from a common source.

Circe seems to stand mythologically for the dangers (from a male point of view) of sexual entanglement. Those who yield to her attractions may find themselves irreversibly transformed. She has links to the world of the dead, as if her attractions could be not only transformative but also lethal. She is powerful, and if her initial threat can be overcome she becomes beneficent. She is a wise woman, and the transformations she effects may be positive. The lovers who can weather the storm of her early hostility are generally enriched by their subsequent involvement with her.

See also: CRETE; DAEDALUS; DIONYSUS; ISHTAR; MINOS; PASIPHAE; POSEIDON; THESEUS; ZEUS.

Further reading

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