

Appendix A

THE WITCH AND THE WIFE:
FEMALE ROLES IN HOMER'S *ODYSSEY*

A RECEPTION STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *CIRCE/MUD POEMS* AND
THE PENELOPIAD

By

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Appendix B

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Abstract

This thesis will analyze Homer's characters Circe and Penelope as they appear in the *Odyssey* alongside the contemporary author Margaret Atwood's version of these two figures in *Circe Mud/Poems* (1971) and the *Penelopiad* (2005). Circe and Penelope are the only two figures who explicitly have sex with Odysseus in the *Odyssey*; despite this connection, they do not oppose each other in the *Odyssey* but are dichotomized in post-Homeric literature. I will show that Homer's Penelope is highly sexually alluring while Homer's Circe is not, despite her sexual relations with Odysseus. This thesis shows how post-Homeric literature and scholarship effectively desexualize Homer's Penelope and hyper-sexualize Homer's Circe. It also shows that Atwood's works do not participate in this dichotomy but are a return to Homer.

Introduction

Homer's *Odyssey* is an ancient Greek epic believed to have been recorded sometime between the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.¹ Originally, the *Odyssey* would have had myriad versions recited orally. The *Odyssey* is the earliest surviving ancient Greek text that inspired countless later poets and authors. The *Odyssey* follows Homer's hero Odysseus on his long and perilous journey to his home of Ithaca after the Trojan war. At the outset, Odysseus has been absent from his wife Penelope and son Telemachus for ten years. On the third year of his journey home, he encounters the goddess Circe, with whom he stays for an entire year, and who plays a crucial role in his final return seven years later. This thesis will focus on how Penelope and Circe appear in Homer and post-Homeric literature.

Penelope and Circe are connected as the only characters who explicitly have sex with Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus has a sexual relationship with the goddess for the entirety of his yearlong stay on her island. However, aside from this, the goddess is not notably alluring or a highly sexualized character, unlike Penelope. Penelope's sexual allure and command of her sexual desirability are her prominent characteristics in the *Odyssey*; sexual allure defines Penelope's character but not Circe's. This critical difference between Penelope and Circe in Homer is a basis for a dichotomy between these figures in post-Homeric literature, wherein Penelope becomes de-sexualized and Circe hyper-sexualized. Penelope's de-sexualization and Circe's hyper-sexualization are in tandem with each other; Penelope is idolized for her sexual restraint, while Circe is demonized for her sexual activity. In the *Odyssey*, these two female

¹ See M.L West "The Date of the Iliad" MH 52 (1995), 207. Wherein West argues that the *Iliad* does not antedate the *Odyssey*, which goes back to at least c. 660.

characters do not stand in opposition to each other except that Penelope is sexually objectified while Circe is not.

The first chapter of this thesis shows Penelope as she appears in the *Odyssey*, followed by her presentation in post-Homeric literature and how Penelope is exhibited in modern scholarship. This demonstrates how post-Homeric versions de-sexualize Homer's Penelope by emphasizing her sexual loyalty to Odysseus over her sexual desirability. Next, Penelope's de-sexualization in post-Homeric literature is shown through examples of Penelope in Plato's *Phaedo*² and *Republic*,³ Pythagoras, Pseudo-Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, Ovid's *Heroides*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Analysis of these sources reveals how Penelope's allure is eclipsed by her sexual restraint, which effectively de-sexualizes Homer's Penelope.

Following the analysis of Penelope is the examination of Circe as she appears in the *Odyssey*; this is followed by the analysis of her presentations in post-Homeric literature and then how Circe is exhibited in modern scholarship. Analysis of the post-Homeric version includes examples from Alcman, Aristotle's *De Anima*, Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,⁴ Vergil's *Aeneid* and, finally, commentaries from Christian writers Clement and St. Augustine. Analysis of these sources reveals how Circe's nature as an autonomous divinity is stripped away by her post-Homeric hyper-sexualization, effectively obscuring the actual role of Homer's Circe.

Once a post-Homeric de-sexualization of Penelope and hyper-sexualization of Circe is established, subsequent analysis of Margaret Atwood's work alongside the *Odyssey* will show how Atwood's work is faithful to the Homeric version of both Penelope and Circe. The second

² Plato, *Phaedo* 250c-d 84a.

³ Plato, *Republic* 487b -496a.

⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.

chapter of this thesis analyzes Margaret Atwood's contemporary work, the *Penelopiad* (2005), alongside the *Odyssey*. Analysis of Atwood's *Penelopiad* elucidates the de-sexualization of Homer's Penelope in post-Homeric literature and modern scholarship. Margaret Atwood's presentation of Penelope is faithful to the Homeric Penelope because she is highly objectified and aware of her sexual desirability. However, Penelope's de-sexualization directly relates to Circe's hyper-sexualization because they are connected as the only two whose sexual relations with Odysseus are explicit in the *Odyssey*. Thus, their characteristics contrast, resulting in Penelope's idolization as faithful and Circe's demonization as a temptress.

This thesis's third and final chapter analyzes Margaret Atwood's *Circe/Mud poems* alongside the *Odyssey*. This analysis shows how Margaret Atwood's presentation of Circe is faithful to Homer's because Atwood's Circe is not hyper-sexualized. Atwood's Circe addresses her sexual relationship with Odysseus by contemplating how it affected her portrayal after Homer by making her oppose Penelope and distorting the actual role of both female characters in the *Odyssey*. Finally, this thesis defines sexuality as the emotional, physical, or social relation of someone to sex, including someone's expression and experience of sex. Compared to sexuality, sexualization is the view of someone's relation to sex, including positive and negative perceptions of one's sexuality. Hyper-sexualization means there is an emphasis on the sexuality of a character, while de-sexualization is the minimilization of sexuality.

Chapter One

The de-sexualization of Homer's Penelope and the hyper-sexualization of Homer's Circe

Penelope in the *Odyssey*

Penelope is famous as the wife of Odysseus, who has unyielding emotional and physical loyalty to her husband during his twenty-year absence. Throughout the *Odyssey*, her husband's palace is overrun by belligerent suitors, who have come seeking Penelope's hand in marriage, assuming that Odysseus is dead. Penelope, pursued by the passing of time and the many suitors, does not waver from the hope she harbours for Odysseus' return and, in the end, is reunited with her husband. The *Odyssey* has had a timeless influence over poets and writers, almost all of whom have received Penelope as an archetype for female chastity, which in many receptions has become synonymous with her intelligence. Such receptions of Homer's Penelope undercut Penelope's highly sexual role in the *Odyssey*, effectively de-sexualizing her. These receptions of Penelope are almost exclusively written by male authors and have created a longstanding tradition which obscures Homer's version of Penelope.

Book One: Penelope, Odysseus, and the Suitors

Penelope's appearances in the *Odyssey* exhibit her extreme desire for the return of her husband Odysseus, her cleverness, and her diligence in guarding her reputation in the face of her sexual desirability to the suitors besieging her home. Penelope first appears in Book One when she hear a bard singing to the suitors in the main hall below and descends from her chamber above (*Od.* 1. 380).⁵ On her descent into the presence of the suitors, Penelope is accompanied by two handmaids with a veil drawn over her face (*Od.* 1. 385). Penelope's descent exhibits the

⁵ All translations by Emily Wilson unless otherwise stated.

careful preservation of her reputation as a faithful wife, which is shown by the concealment of her physical body via the veiling of her face and her accompaniment by two handmaids – both necessary in the presence of other men. Penelope is never alone with these men; her body is carefully concealed from their gaze. Penelope’s use of the maid’s company protects her chaste reputation as a married woman by never being alone in male company. Penelope’s intelligence is reflected in her awareness of her desirability, shown through the careful and strategic protection of her reputation. Penelope is the object of the suitor’s political desires as the queen of Ithaca and the gatekeeper of its wealth. Still, she is also the object of their sexual desires which is demonstrated through her self-concealment from the suitor’s gaze.

The suitor's sexual desire for Penelope is made explicit after Penelope leaves their company: they break into an uproar, praying to lie beside her and share her bed (*Od.* 1. 420).⁶ The suitors’ words are notable because they could have prayed to gain her riches but lusted after her instead. Therefore, it is made explicit in the *Odyssey* that Penelope is not only politically desirable to the suitors but *sexually* desirable. If Penelope were not an object of sexual desire, then there would be no reason for the suitors’ lust.

Penelope, as an object of the suitors’ desires, is presented alongside her object of desire — her husband, Odysseus. Penelope descends from her chamber weeping in her first appearance because the bard is singing about her husband’s journey (*Od.* 1. 379). The constant direction of Penelope’s desires toward Odysseus exhibits her loyalty to him. Penelope’s loyalty to Odysseus’ *oikos* is shown when her son Telemachus orders her not to think only of Odysseus and return to her quarters to weave and keep the other women working hard (*Od.* 1. 410-415). Penelope heeds her sons’ commands because she is loyal to him as the male authority in the house in Odysseus’

⁶ After Penelope exits, the suitors, “throughout the shadowy hall...clamoured, praying to lie beside [Penelope] in her bed” (*Od.* 1.364-5).

absence. Following her descent into the company of the suitors, Penelope dutifully returns to her chambers, where even alone, she weeps for Odysseus (*Od.* 1. 415). Penelope's solitary longing shows that her desires for Odysseus are not performative but genuinely her own. Her passions are symbolically emphasized by her location, which is in bed, meant to be a privately shared space by herself and Odysseus. By placing her in their bed, Penelope's desire for Odysseus is presented as locationally connected to their sexual relationship. Penelope's desire for Odysseus is, therefore, linked to her sexual desires and Odysseus' desires for her.

Book Eleven: Penelope in Odysseus' Thoughts

Penelope's second appearance occurs in Book Eleven when she is the topic of conversation between Odysseus and the spirit of his mother while he is travelling through the Underworld (*Od.* 11. 169). Penelope is not present but is inquired about eagerly by Odysseus. He wants to know about Penelope's state of mind and whether she remains standing beside their son, guarding the family estates — or if she has wed another (*Od.* 11. 195-205). Odysseus' mother informs him that, despite the fourteen years of his absence, Penelope still waits for him in his halls, suffering an endless hardship of weeping day and night, and has not remarried yet (*Od.* 11. 210). Penelope is presented as the object of desire once more, although this time as the desire of Odysseus instead of the suitors. Odysseus's inquiry about Penelope, while not overtly sexual, does concern her sexual fidelity about her marital status. After Odysseus' encounter with his mother, Penelope's desires are set in stark relief against the sexual exploits of her cousin, Clytemnestra.

Clytemnestra is the wife of Agamemnon, a former comrade of Odysseus in the Trojan war, and whose spirit speaks with Odysseus in the underworld. Agamemnon tells Odysseus how he was killed by a plot of his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus (*Od.* 11. 465).

Agamemnon tells Odysseus never to reveal the entire truth to his wife but to arrive home secretly because there are no trusting women (*Od.* 11. 502). Agamemnon continues that Penelope is too wise to act as Clytemnestra (*Od.* 11. 445). Agamemnon's statements about Penelope appear to contradict each other. Agamemnon discredits women generally and then credits Penelope for being wiser than other women, thus, making her cleverness synonymous with her sexual inactivity with the suitors. Agamemnon's comment on Penelope asserts that although she is an object of sexual desire (presumably to anyone in Odysseus' absence), she would not be disloyal to him, reflecting her intellect.

In the *Odyssey*, Penelope's presentation of intelligence alongside her sexuality is shown using the Greek word *περίφρων*, which is commonly used to describe Penelope and translates to thoughtful or careful. Agamemnon's speech contrasts the destruction caused by Clytemnestra's sexual infidelity against the fidelity of Penelope; Clytemnestra's sexual disloyalty becomes synonymous with wickedness in contrast to Penelope's sexual loyalty and wisdom.

Agamemnon's comments on Penelope and Clytemnestra affirm that it is how Penelope chooses to command her sexuality that exhibits her intelligence. Therefore, Penelope's role as an ideal wife includes her sexuality and how she commands it.

Book Seventeen: Penelope's Descent into the Suitor's Company

Penelope controlling her sexuality appears again in Book Seventeen when she descends again from her chamber into the presence of the suitors, appearing to all like Artemis or Aphrodite (*Od.* 17. 40). Penelope is compared to Artemis, who is a virgin and Aphrodite who is the goddess of sexuality and desire. The two goddesses have highly contrasting divinities, but Penelope is distinctly presented as embodying critical aspects of both goddesses, such as chastity, self-containment, *and* sexual allure. Penelope's descent shows that all the suitors' eyes are upon her,

and she is aware of this. She commands their attention primarily due to their sexual objectification of her. Penelope is an object of their desires, and how she navigates this attention is imperative in her role in Odysseus' successful return. Penelope's role as an ideal wife includes her sexuality and how she commands it.

Later in Book Seventeen, the suitor Antinous strikes Odysseus while he is disguised as a beggar; when Penelope hears of this, she cries a wish that Apollo will strike Antinous down (*Od.* 17. 550). Penelope's reprimand of Antinous shows her unyielding fidelity to Odysseus, as head of their *oikos*. At Penelope's request, the beggar is brought forth so she can question him for news of Odysseus (*Od.* 17. 565). Penelope wishes to meet with the beggar immediately but, the beggar wishes to wait until nightfall to avoid the abuse of the suitors and to have a private audience with Penelope (*Od.* 17. 200). Penelope's quiet assent to meet the beggar alone after dark shows her consciousness of her sexual reputation. By meeting alone at night, Penelope is removed from the eyes of the suitors, which allows Penelope to diligently guard her reputation while doing all she can for her husband.

Book Eighteen: Athena Enhances Penelope's Beauty

Following Penelope's reception with beggar Odysseus, her next appearance is in Book Eighteen, wherein her desirability is purposefully accentuated by the goddess Athena. In this episode, Athena inspires the typically wary and poised Penelope to display herself before the suitors to inflame their hearts (*Od.* 18. 180). Athena emphasizes Penelope's appearance to make her more physically beautiful and sexually desirable to the suitors. First, Athena puts Penelope to sleep and anoints her with immortal gifts of beauty so the suitors would lose themselves in the wonder of her appearance (*Od.* 18. 219). Next, Athena cleaned Penelope's face, making her body taller and fuller in form and her skin lighter (*Od.* 18. 220-225). Following Athena's adornments,

Penelope descends from her chamber, accompanied by two handmaids with a veil drawn over her face in front of the suitors (*Od.* 18. 238). At the sight of Penelope, “the suitors weakened at the knees; desire bewitched them, and they longed to lie with her (*Od.* 18. 208- 10). The Greek verb ἔρω (*Od.* 18. 206), which means to love or to desire, is used to describe the suitor’s hearts at the sight of Penelope; the word ἔθελεν (*Od.* 18, 213) is also used, which translates to enchant or bewitch.

Athena’s plan works. In their lust, the suitors present more gifts to Penelope. In this episode, Athena’s adornment of Penelope shows that she is a highly sexualized character in Homer. Penelope’s sexual desirability is purposefully emphasized through her physical beauty to extract material wealth, while still maintaining her role as a dutiful mother and wife. Athena’s adornment of Penelope demonstrates that Homer’s Penelope is a highly sexualized character and that the command of her sexuality is central to Odysseus’ triumphant homecoming. Penelope’s intelligence is not displayed by her sexual inactivity; instead, Penelope’s deliberate manipulation of her sexual desirability is a display of her wisdom. Emblematic of Penelope’s wisdom is her infamous weaving scheme.

Book Nineteen: Penelope’s Weaving Scheme

In the Nineteenth Book of the *Odyssey*, Penelope confesses to beggar Odysseus that she told the suitors she would choose one of them for her husband when she had completed weaving a funeral shroud for her father-in-law’s funeral. Penelope pretended to weave her father in laws funeral shroud by day while unweaving it by night and successfully fooled the suitors for almost four years (*Od.* 19. 160). Penelope’s weaving scheme exhibits her cleverness because it preserves her position as Odysseus’ wife and maintains her position of power in her husband’s absence. In addition, Penelope’s weaving is vital to her avoiding marrying one of the suitors

since, weaving and funeral rites were gendered tasks for women, and the male suitors did not question her progress.⁷ Penelope's cleverness is contrasted against the avarice of the suitors, who could only imagine Penelope in her bed sleeping at night while she was sneaking out of her bedchamber and unweaving.⁸ Penelope's appearance in Book Nineteen is much like in Book One; both episodes assert that she is clever *and* highly sexualized.

Book Twenty-Three: Penelope's Final Appearance

Penelope's final appearance is in Book Twenty-Three after Odysseus reveals himself (*Od.* 23. 190-200). Penelope remains unmoved to embrace him or accept that he truly is her husband and orders the maid Eurycleia to have her bed removed from her chamber so that Odysseus may sleep in his bed (*Od.* 23. 200). Odysseus breaks into an immediate outrage since their bed is carved from an olive tree which is still rooted in the ground (*Od.* 23. 210), thus proving to Penelope that it is genuinely Odysseus — because only she and Odysseus know the nature of their bed. Penelope accepts that he is her husband and rushes to him, kissing and hugging him (*Od.* 23. 230). Following Penelope's test of the olive tree bed, the couple are led to their chamber, where they return to their bed (*Od.* 23. 335-350), and Penelope explicitly has sex with Odysseus.

In the *Odyssey*, particular attention is given to Penelope's sexual desirability. She is presented as an object of sexual desire for the suitors (and her husband) and shows awareness of her sexuality by either guarding it or using it to extract gifts from the suitors. Penelope commands her sexual appeal through her physical appearance and shows her intelligence and strategy by using her sexuality to gain material wealth and information about her husband. The

⁷ Because weaving was a gendered task, the suitors were segregated from the women's quarters where the weaving took place. In combination with unweaving at night, Penelope fooled the suitors. See Massoura 2017, 143.

⁸ See Massoura 2017, 399. Wherein Massoura argues that the suitors were blinded by their ignorance of women's works, that they were blinded by their own plots that they never imagine Penelope would be acting against them.

sexuality of Penelope's character is most plain when she explicitly has sex with Odysseus in Book Twenty-Three. Penelope's sexuality is central to her cleverness and loyalty. Penelope is the ideal wife *and* understands the pivotal role of her sexual appeal, in command of which she uses her intellect and loyalty to govern. Penelope's overtly sexual character in the *Odyssey* is not reflected in post-Homeric representations of Penelope in the ancient world or in modern scholarship.

Penelope in Ancient Literature

Homer's Penelope is desexualized in post-Homeric literature by Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, and Christian writers. In the fifth century BCE, Plato wrote that Penelope's weaving and unweaving symbolized the unphilosophical man who constantly re-tied his soul to his body.⁹ Plato wrote that the philosopher would think that philosophy would set the soul free and give it power over the pleasures and pains of the body. Plato used Penelope's weaving in the *Odyssey* to symbolize how philosophy frees the soul from the body, and how not pursuing philosophy was like Penelope unweaving the web she wove. Penelope's weaving represented how the pleasures of the body, such as sexual desire, would not overpower the actions of a philosophical man.¹⁰ Plato's use of Penelope's weaving as a symbol of wisdom and its power over the desires of the body associates Penelope's weaving with wisdom expressed by the suppression of sexuality.

In the 5th century, BCE Plato defined philosophy as the "love for wisdom."¹¹ This idea of Plato affected later personifications of philosophy, often depicted as young, beautiful, and female who were often maternal or nurse-like figures that took on roles as teachers and guides. Plato's use of Penelope's weaving as a symbol of wisdom and its power over the desires of the body

⁹ See Hall (2008), Hellman (1995) and Plato's *Republic* and *Phaedo*.

¹⁰ See *Phaedo*, 84A. Plato's use of Penelope symbolizes that the mind should have control over the desires of the body.

¹¹ Plato *Apology*, 38A.

associates Penelope's weaving with wisdom expressed by the suppression of sexuality. As Hellman (1995, 293, n.31) explains:

Socrates cautions ... against giving in to pleasures since these ... give philosophy the same kind of useless task represented by Penelope's weaving and unweaving.

In effect, Plato uses Penelope to represent philosophy as what can bind (weave) or release (unweave) sexual passion. In Plato's *Republic*, female pronouns are used to identify philosophy. Plato writes, "men unfit for culture approach philosophy and consort with *her* unworthily."¹² The use of female pronouns for philosophy associate philosophy with traditional female-gendered characteristics. A feminine noun in Greek (φιλοσοφία), philosophy is also *symbolically* female in Plato's *Republic*, wherein female pronouns are used to identify philosophy. By gendering philosophy, Plato directly associates his ideas surrounding the female sex with knowledge. Sexual oppression then becomes a philosophical expression of female intelligence, which directly conflicts with Penelope's presentation in Homer by exploiting her own sexuality.

Schools of philosophy continue Plato's association of female wisdom and sexual restraint during the Hellenistic period. The schools of Cynics and the Stoics used Penelope and her weaving as a symbol for studying philosophy and the logic in their allegories inspired by epic poetry.¹³ Penelope's weaving was inextricably linked to philosophy and represented the pursuit of reason. Philosophers Pseudo-Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius (in the second century CE) both present Penelope's weaving as the embodiment of reason and, by late antiquity, non-Christian

¹² See portrayal of Lady Philosophy in Plato's *Republic* 487b-496a and analysis of this in Helleman 1995, 1.

¹³ Helleman 1995, 2.

Neoplatonists used Penelope to represent contemplative wisdom.¹⁴ Because of her weaving, Penelope becomes the symbol of reason.

In Homer, however, her weaving was presented as an exhibit of her cleverness and prominent sexual desirability. Penelope's sexual desirability is not found in later texts, wherein she is only mentioned with two elements essential to her character: a weaver that unweaves and an ideal faithful wife.¹⁵ Adaptations of Penelope, like those of Plato's discussed above, often reflected contemporary agendas favouring Penelope's sexual restraint from the suitors over any other aspect of her character in Homer.

Post- Homeric authors subdue any sexual element of Penelope's devotion to Odysseus. For example, Ovid's version of Penelope is presented with some agency but without the sexual allure she possesses in the *Odyssey*. Ovid's *Heroides* begins with a letter written by Penelope to Odysseus sometime during his long absence. Ovid's Penelope embarks on a journey herself which is much like Odysseus' in the *Odyssey*. However, Ovid gives Penelope the agency and freedom to travel and remove herself from the gendered spaces of the palace. Penelope's ability to travel and leave the home transfers to her the same power possessed by her mobile husband.¹⁶ Penelope's tone of her first-person narration in her letter to Odysseus is highly personal, indicating that her emotions are genuine, which suggests that everything she writes in her letter to Odysseus is of her own volition. Ovid's Penelope knows about Odysseus' infidelity but still

¹⁴ Allegorical reinventions of Penelope and her suitors found in Hellenistic authors, particularly pseudo-Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, use feminine personifications of wisdom. Homer's Penelope in Boethius' *Philosophia* provides us with a case of compositional allegory as a creative portrayal of philosophy as a woman. Depicted initially with many a reminiscence from Homeric literature, she also speaks of having followers among well-known representatives of pagan philosophical schools, including Socrates and Plato. Boethius authenticates the lady as truly representative of the philosophical tradition going back to pagan antiquity. See Helleman 1995.

¹⁵ Clayton 2004, 62.

¹⁶ Belinskaya 2020, 1.

notes that she will never remarry because “she is his, and forever she shall be.”¹⁷ Ovid's use of Penelope's first-person narrative removes authority from Odysseus while giving authority to Penelope, who shows her devotion to her husband despite her apprehension regarding his sexual exploits in the *Odyssey*. This transference of authority can be explained because the Romans saw the multi-faceted hero of Odysseus as problematic for his powers of deception.¹⁸ Although Odysseus was problematic for his powers of deception, Penelope was favoured for her sexual faithfulness.

The transference of narrative authority to Penelope by Ovid grants her agency different than in Homer, but as in Homer, Ovid's Penelope pines after Odysseus because she loves him. However, Ovid's Penelope is not an object of sexual desire or allure. Instead, Ovid's Penelope fears that Odysseus may be in love with a stranger, and that is why he is so long away. In the wake of her suspicions about her husband, Penelope refers to herself as a “rustic” wife who is only suited to work the wool.¹⁹ Ovid's Penelope is a devoted wife who is not sexual but, in fact, “rustic,” which is a word that, in context, means simple, unsophisticated, and homely.²⁰ Ovid's Penelope is unlike Homer's because she is presented as *not* sexually desirable, specifically through her fear of Odysseus' infidelity and self-description as “*rusticus*.” Post-Homeric versions of Penelope, including those by Plato and Ovid, significantly influenced later writers throughout antiquity and the medieval period.

The latest author of the ancient world is the fifth-century philosopher Boethius, who wrote before ancient texts were lost and subsequently rediscovered with the Renaissance. He was

¹⁷ Penelope is depicted as an unyieldingly faithful wife who is measured by her loyalty to Odysseus. See Ovid *Heriodes* I, 17. 81-84 translation by Jacobson, Howard, 1974.

¹⁸This is argued at length by Rebecca Anne Miller's *The Roman Odyssey*, 2015.

¹⁹ Ovid *Heriodes* I, 17. 76-78.

²⁰ Larson 2001, 42 and Belinskaya 2020, 195.

directly influenced by earlier ancient philosophers and poets such as Plato and Ovid. Boethius was especially influenced by Plato's ideas about sexual restraint and its relation to intelligence. Boethius' most known work, the *Consolation of Philosophy* presents a character called "Lady Philosophy" who represents the female embodiment of wisdom.

In the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Lady Philosophy is of "awe-inspiring appearance," and her dress is woven with her own delicate skill.²¹ Lady Philosophy's associations with intellect, beauty and weaving are all qualities she shares with Homer's Penelope. Boethius was greatly influenced by Homer and classical philosophers, particularly Plato, Socrates, the Epicureans, and the Stoics.²² Because of Plato's immense influence upon Boethius, a connection can be drawn between Lady Philosophy and Penelope.²³ Aside from beauty, intellect, and weaving, Lady Philosophy is more like Ovid's Penelope than Homer's because she has no erotic or sexual desire associated with her character.²⁴ Lady Philosophy is also more reflective of Plato's ideas of sexual restraint as an aspect of a philosophical life than Homer's Penelope because she is distinctly not erotic or sexually desirable but *is* definitively philosophical. Between Homer and Boethius, there is a notable divide between sex or sexual desirability and intelligence, wisdom, and the act of weaving.

The divergence of sex and wisdom continued into the medieval period with the twelfth-century scholar Eustathius, who wrote a collection of *Scholia* on the *Odyssey*. For example, Penelope was named among the pagan women famed for their chastity by St. Jerome in the fourth century AD. Similarly, Eustathius' *Scholia* presents ideas akin to Plato's, which

²¹ Boethius' Lady Philosophy shares many defining characteristics of Penelope: she is patient and connected to weaving, which as discussed earlier symbolizes her wisdom and by extension also her sexual restraint. See Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 3-4.

²² Boethius, 7.

²³ Rand emphasized Boethius' originality through his reworking of sources, especially Plato and Aristotle, with Christian sensitivity. See Rand 1904: 1-2.

²⁴ Helleman 2009, 280-286.

considered weaving as symbolic of philosophical activity and unweaving as a symbol of the logic involved in the analysis.²⁵ Penelope's reputation becomes that of a sexually undesirable, sexually restrained woman, which obscures the view of Homer's Penelope, who is highly desirable, an object of much sexual desire and in command of her sexuality.

Penelope in Modern Scholarship

The desexualization of Homer's Penelope persists in modern scholarship, where we also see a demonization of beauty related to sexual deviance. Penelope's representations in modern scholarship do not show Penelope as the object of sexual desire that she is in the *Odyssey* but instead focus on her modesty and fidelity. By not exhibiting Penelope as she is found in the *Odyssey*, the process of desexualizing Homer's Penelope, which began with post-Homeric authors, is continued. Penelope often appears in modern scholarship as a "heroically faithful wife" who represents the ideal partner of the long-suffering Odysseus.²⁶ For example, Helene Foley describes Penelope as the cooperative wife of her authoritative husband; she is, above all, the "extraordinary faithful wife" who plays her traditional role as the ideal spouse actively.²⁷ Foley focuses on Penelope's faithfulness to Odysseus and presents this characteristic to the conducive absence of Penelope's sexuality or desires.

Penelope features in most sections of Foley's chapter titled "Women in Ancient Epic," but she does not appear in the chapter "Women in Love," which includes Dido²⁸, Medea²⁹ and Nausicaa.³⁰ Modern scholarship does not consider Penelope as a woman associated with love, which obscures the pivotal role of Penelope's sexual desire and desirability in the *Odyssey*. As a

²⁵ Helleman 1995, 286.

²⁶ Foley 1995, 121.

²⁷ Foley 1995, 64 and 111.

²⁸ See Vergil's *Aeneid* book 4. Wherein Dido is the lover of Vergil's hero Aeneas and commits suicide after he leaves her.

²⁹ See the myth of Medea and Jason in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, 246-221 BC.

³⁰ See Homer's *Odyssey*, 6. 275.

result, Penelope is often not included by scholars among the mythological women thought of in the context of sex and desire; instead, Penelope's sexual fidelity tends to eclipse her sexual desirability, and Penelope's distinct sexuality in Homer is forgotten.

Penelope's lack of sexual representation is also presented in the scholarship as part of her guardianship of her husband's *oikos*. Scholar Marilyn Katz describes Penelope as the ideal wife responsible for safeguarding the *oikos* to which her husband Odysseus wishes to return.³¹ Penelope's sexual fidelity and weaving scheme in the *Odyssey* fulfill her purpose of postponing remarrying until Odysseus returns, effectively protecting his *oikos*. However, these scholars do not present Penelope as a figure who is an object of the suitors' sexual desires. Instead, Felson and Slatkin compare Penelope to Helen and Clytemnestra, both of whom are disloyal in their husbands' absences and, by comparison, make Penelope's decision to remain faithful the core of her character in the *Odyssey*.³² Penelope is presented in contrast to Helen and Clytemnestra because they are both considered women who lack restraint over their sexual desires.

The comparison of Penelope to Helen and Clytemnestra's behaviour in their husbands' absences links irrationality with sexuality and rationality with sexual restraint. Penelope becomes a figure of rationality because of her sexual discretion, while Helen and Clytemnestra become figures of irrationality because of their sexual activity. Felson and Slatkin go on to explain that Penelope is an ideal bride despite having no male guardian and describe her as circumspect, unlike Helen or Clytemnestra.³³ Although Penelope's sexual activities or lack thereof are the

³¹ Katz argues that Penelope's role of the faithful wife "converges...with the paradigm of Helen's betrayal," suggesting that her irresolution or lack of remarriage suggests her association with Clytemnestra and Helen; Penelope "subvert[s] the distinction between faithfulness and betrayal." Katz argues that Penelope is contrasted against Helen and Clytemnestra, who are seductive and duplicitous (Katz, 2014, 193).

³² See. *Iliad* books 3 and 4, for Helen and Paris. See *Odyssey* 11, 430. for Clytemnestra and for analysis see, Felson and Slatkin 2004, 10.

³³ Felson and Slatkin 2004, 107.

primary topics of discussion, Felson and Slatkin's argument undervalues Penelope's overt sexuality and sexual desirability in the *Odyssey* and, by doing so, continues to perpetuate a desexualized version of Homer's Penelope.

Penelope's sexuality is suppressed mainly in modern scholarship by focusing on her sexual restraint with the suitors. Foley presents Penelope as an ideal wife because of her lack of sexual activity and does not consider her a figure in ancient epic associated with love. Felson and Slatkin present Helen and Clytemnestra alongside Penelope to highlight the virtue of Penelope's fidelity by comparison. Still, they do not present Penelope with attention to her sexualization in Homer.³⁴ By not emphasizing Penelope's sexuality in Homer, none of these scholars consider Homer's Penelope as a highly sexualized character. In scholarship and post-Homeric literature, Penelope's lack of sexual activity with the suitors eclipses all trace of Penelope's sexual desirability, which is prominent in the *Odyssey*.

By not acknowledging that sexual objectification is central to Penelope's character, her proper role in the *Odyssey* becomes obscured. Neglect in scholarship towards the sexual aspect of Penelope's character in Homer is crucial to understanding Penelope's role in the *Odyssey* as a highly sexualized figure. Furthermore, this neglect inherits and perpetuates the post-Homeric de-sexualization of Penelope. Penelope's de-sexualization works in tandem with the hyper-sexualization of Homer's Circe.

Circe in the *Odyssey*

The goddess Circe is most known from Book Ten of Homer's *Odyssey*, wherein she features prominently throughout and appears only once more in Book Twelve. In her first

³⁴ Felson and Slatkin 2004, 107.

appearance, Circe is presented as a “beautiful, dreadful goddess” who lives alone on her island, Aiaia (*Od.* 10. 138-40). Odysseus washes ashore on Aiaia three years into his homeward travels and chooses to stay with Circe for a year until his comrades beg him to leave (*Od.* 10. 485). After their arrival, Odysseus’ comrades find Circe singing and weaving in her palace, surrounded by friendly mountain lions and wolves she “tamed with drugs” (*Od.* 10, 210-20). The word *θέλξαι* (*Od.* 10. 290), which comes from *θέλγειν*, which means “to bewitch,” is used to describe Circe’s drugs. The same word is also used to describe Penelope’s effect upon the suitors (*Od.* 18, 213). Penelope’s ability to “bewitch” the suitors is sexually charged, as discussed above, but Circe’s is not. In the context that *θέλξαι* is used in Book Ten is not referring to anything sexual but instead to Circe’s power to control the animals. Therefore, *θέλξαι* is used to express the power of each of these female figures: for Penelope, it is her beauty used to ensnare the suitors; for Circe, it is her potions to tame the animals. *θέλξαι* is not used to refer to Circe’s appearance and in Homer’s text, there is no emphasis on the goddess’s beauty or allure.

The word used to describe Circe’s physical appearance is *καλλιπλοκάμοιο* (*Od.* 10. 310), which translates as “beautiful locks.” Unlike Penelope, Circe lacks sexual allure, but like Penelope, Circe is associated with weaving in her first appearance. After encountering Circe’s animals, Odysseus’ men heard Circe singing inside her palace as she weaved at her great loom, and they could not tell if she was a goddess or a mortal woman (*Od.* 10. 230-250). Circe’s physical appearance is like a mortal woman, indicating she is not markedly beautiful, unlike Penelope, who, as mentioned earlier, appears in front of the suitors looking like Artemis or Aphrodite. Circe is like Penelope since she is associated with weaving (and, therefore, intelligence), but unlike Penelope, she is not presented as an object of sexual desire.

Weaving, as discussed previously, is a symbol of philosophy and intelligence. In Book Twenty- Three, Circe is described by Odysseus with the Greek verb *περίφρων* which is the same verb used to describe Penelope and denotes wisdom and intelligence (*Od.* 23, 320). Circe's presentation emphasizes her intelligence but does not emphasize her beauty or sexuality. Like Penelope, Circe is the only other woman who has sex with Odysseus *in* the *Odyssey*. However, unlike Penelope, Circe is not the object of Odysseus' desires; instead, he has sex with her on the instruction of the god Hermes (*Od.* 10, 295). From the outset, Circe's appearance in the *Odyssey* associates her with intelligence (like Penelope) and does not present her as an object of sexual desire (unlike Penelope).

Shortly after finding Circe weaving in her palace, the sailors enter, and Circe gives them a potion, strikes them with her wand, and turns them into pigs (*Od.* 10. 235-7). Odysseus eludes his transformation with the help of the god Hermes who gives Odysseus the antidote for Circe's potion and instructs him to sleep with the goddess once she has sworn an oath (*Od.* 10. 320-380). After Odysseus drinks Circe's potion and does not transform, he draws his sword and rushes her; she supplicates and recognizes that he must be Odysseus, then she invites him to bed with her (*Od.* 10. 360-370). Circe is powerful: she has prophetic abilities, demonstrated through her recognition of Odysseus without his identifying himself, and she can transform the mind and body, as shown when she alters the men's physical state and memory. Finally, Odysseus is *not* transformed by the goddess, nor does he sleep with her out of desire. The description of Circe shows her as powerful and intelligent but lacks emphasis on beauty or appearance.

The narrative episode continues with Circe agreeing to the oath and the two sleeping together (*Od.* 10. 385). After they share her bed, Circe presents Odysseus with a feast, which he refuses to eat until his comrades are returned to human form (*Od.* 10. 390-400). Circe obliges

and makes the men younger and more handsome than before, and once transformed, the men embrace Odysseus (*Od.* 10. 430-440). This sight moved Circe so that she urged Odysseus to go to his ship and bring back the rest of his crew (*Od.* 10. 440). Odysseus and his comrades remain on Aiaia at their leisure, feasting and resting for an entire year. During this time, Odysseus continues his sexual relationship with Circe until his men persuade him to continue homeward. Once Odysseus tells Circe his wishes to leave, the two do not sleep together again. Their relationship ends peacefully, and Circe does not question Odysseus' will to go (*Od.* 10. 530-35). Although Circe, like Penelope, has sexual relations with Odysseus, at no point is there mention of Circe's allure or beauty, only her intellect and power as a goddess.

Circe herself only appears now, in the Twelfth Book of the *Odyssey*. After Odysseus has returned from the Underworld, he and his sailors are immediately met by Circe, who, with the help of her handmaidens, brings them trays of food and jugs of wine and welcomes them warmly (*Od.* 12. 20). She tells them that they must return to sailing the following day and that she will provide them with a chart of the course they must take (*Od.* 12. 30). Following Circe's instructions, the sailors sit and feast all day. That night Circe takes Odysseus to her bed, where she asks him all about his journey to the Underworld (*Od.* 12. 30-50). The two don't engage in sexual relations, once Odysseus finishes his story, Circe tells him the details of his course home after leaving her island, particularly how to avoid Scylla, Charybdis and the Sirens (*Od.* 12. 30-50). Finally, Circe fills Odysseus' ships with provisions and sends the men on their way. Circe does not hinder Odysseus' journey but steers him toward his home in Ithaca.

Ultimately, Circe is like Penelope because she has sex with Odysseus, is associated with weaving, and is presented as intelligent. However, Circe differs from Penelope in that she is *not* the object of sexual desire, she is *not* presented with emphasis on her sexual allure, and she does

not live under the authority of men. Homer's Circe is presented foremost as an autonomous goddess who is closely associated with nature and is not an alluring figure, unlike Penelope who is distinctly sexualized. As discussed previously, post-Homeric literature and scholarship on Homer's Penelope have de-sexualized her character while hyper-sexualizing Homer's Circe. After Homer, Circe is presented as a sexually alluring and perilous witch who is a danger to all men. I will now turn to a discussion of Circe in later ancient texts, starting with the poet Alcman, a contemporary author, and to the estimated dates of when the *Odyssey* was recorded.

Circe in Post-Homeric literature

Like Homer, the seventh-century BCE writer Alcman presents Circe's character positively and emphasizes her generous help to Odysseus and his comrades. Alcman's Circe aids the sailors by putting the wax in their ears herself, so they are safe from the Siren's song, and she is celebrated for her helpful and warm qualities.³⁵ Alcman, like Homer, does not present Circe as sexually alluring or as a threatening figure. Alcman's fragment shows Circe aiding Odysseus and his men against the Sirens, presenting her as helpful as she is in the *Odyssey*. Alcman writes: "Circe once, having anointed the ears of the comrades of strong-hearted Odysseus . . . though she did not anoint them herself but charged Odysseus to anoint them." Alcman differs from Homer by having Odysseus anoint the sailors instead of Circe herself but remains faithful to Homer's Circe as a helpful figure.

After the archaic poets, Circe is represented as perceivably sexualized, which increases with early Latin and especially Christian writers, resulting in her eventual hyper-sexualization that remains prevalent into the twentieth century. In the fourth century, Xenophon features

³⁵ Alcman, frag. 28 in *Lyrice Graeca Selecta*, ed. Page, 23.

Odysseus engaging in a dialogue with a man transformed into a pig while on Circe's Island (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 2 and 5 f, 989). The pig, called Gryllus, wishes not to transform back into a man because of the moral superiority of animals over humans, whom he considers the most unfortunate of creatures. Gryllus claims that animals, such as himself, "live in an abundance of good things" and, during his subsequent discussion of temperance, says to Odysseus, "you are eager to hear about temperance since you are the husband of a model of chastity and believe that you have given a proof of self-control by rejecting the embraces of Circe."³⁶ Xenophon's version of the story, therefore, has Odysseus refuse to sleep with Circe and emphasizes Penelope's chastity as her main virtue, differing from Homer. Gryllus' speech to Odysseus desexualizes Penelope by emphasizing her chastity while sexualizing Circe by presenting her as highly dangerous and desirous of Odysseus. Xenophon's *Memorbilia* indicates a distinct shift towards the hyper-sexualization of Homer's Circe, beginning in the fourth century BCE.

The third-century BCE poem, Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, follows the figures of Medea and Jason in their escape from Colchis to their arrival on Circe's Island, where they are seeking to be purified of the murder and dismemberment of Medea's brother Absyrtus. Apollonius' Circe is found bathing in the sea accompanied by primordial monsters and her eyes are described as golden as a mark of her father, the primordial sun god Helios. Apollonius' presentation of Circe differs from Homer's because she is presented as a threatening and unknown figure, as indicated by her golden eyes and the transformation of Circe's tamed and docile beasts from the *Odyssey* into monsters. Rhodius' hero Jason finds Circe leading a throng of beasts who did not resemble "the beasts of the wild, nor yet like men in body, but with a

³⁶ Xenophons, *Memorabilia*, 2 and 5 f, 989.

medley of limbs.... such creatures, compacted of various limbs, did each herself produce from the primeval slime.”³⁷ The emphasis on Circe’s golden eyes and the company of monsters connects her primordial heritage to the alluring danger of the unknown. Apollonius’ presentation of Circe as unknown, powerful, and dangerous is continued by later poets and connected more closely with sexual allure.

Vergil’s epic, the *Aeneid*, is strongly adapted from the *Odyssey*. Vergil adapted the *Aeneid* from the *Odyssey* to reflect Roman values. Although Vergil’s epic is similar to Homer’s, his version of Circe is presented as a perilous witch whom Aeneas avoids. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas passes by Circe’s island and hears the “furious growls of lions bridling at their chains... the raging of bristly boars ... [and] the men whose shapes the brutal goddess Circe changed with her potent drugs.”³⁸ Vergil’s Circe is much changed from Homer’s Circe, whose animals are calm and tame on a peaceful island while Vergil’s Aiaia is a hostile place, filled with vicious beasts whose terror echoes from afar. Vergil, like Apollonius, depicts Circe as an extremely dangerous figure who is best avoided. Vergil’s depiction of Circe shows the villainization of her representations since Homer.

In the first century, BCE Circe is presented by Roman poet Ovid as a character of extreme lust in his Fourteenth book of the *Metamorphoses*.³⁹ Ovid presents Circe as a spiteful and jealous witch who transforms various men into animals for not desiring her sexually. Ovid writes of Circe’s relationships and subsequent transformations of Glaucus, Odysseus, and Picus, the last of whom she turned into a bird as the result of being scorned.⁴⁰ Ovid’s Circe is a harmful figure who does not let men leave her without retaliation, unlike in Homer, wherein Circe is an

³⁷ *Argonautica*, 5. 659.

³⁸ *Aeneid*, 7, 20-25.

³⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14, 1-74.

⁴⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 14, 320-396.

excellent aid to Odysseus when he wishes to leave her island. Ovid's version of Circe implies that the purpose of the goddesses' magical gifts of *pharmakia* is for ensnaring and bewitching men.⁴¹ Circe's *pharmakia*, the potions she uses to transform Odysseus' comrades into pigs in the *Odyssey*, are also central to her appearances in Ovid. Ovid's Circe transforms multiple men into animals out of spite based on unrequited sexual desire. Ovid continues Apollonius' associations of Circe with the danger of the unknown, represented by her potions. Ovid forges a connection between Circe's powers and sexual desire by linking her status as a mysterious and powerful woman with evil irrationality and spitefulness, solidifying her as a great danger to all men.

Christian authors, such as Clement and St. Augustine, writing in the third century CE, viewed Homer as a pagan poet but still considered his work authoritative. Clement's *Stromateris* uses Circe to aid his illustration of the choices to be made by the Christian soul. St. Augustine writes about Circe in his *The City of God*, calling her "*Maga famosissima*," or "most famous sorceress," and presenting her as a demon.⁴² Augustine's writings have unparalleled influence in the Latin Middle Ages and later writers largely inherited his demonization of Circe.⁴³ Like Ovid, Augustine's writings were present and influential in the early Middle Ages. Consequently, Ovid's and Augustine's depictions of the villainous Circe better suited the Christian agenda and were therefore perpetuated, while Homer's Circe was lost to obscurity. Post-Homeric versions of Circe's myths differ so significantly from the original that the aspect of the original narrative wherein Circe is a helpful figure is wholly eradicated.⁴⁴ As shown in this section Homer's Circe is distinctly hyper-sexualized in post-Homeric literature, which remains prevalent today even in modern scholarship.

⁴¹ Yarnall 1994, 89.

⁴² St. Augustine, *City of God*, 18.17, trans. Sanford and Green.

⁴³ Yarnall 1994, 94.

⁴⁴ Yarnall 1994, 73.

Circe in Modern Scholarship

Circe's representations in modern scholarship follow in the same vein as post-Homeric literature by presenting Circe as an inherently sexualized character. In scholarship, Circe's power and her sexual relationship with Odysseus become symbolic of her sexual allure, which is filled with physical pleasure and subordinates the male to the female.⁴⁵ Scholarship tends to see a power politics represented by Circe's and Odysseus' sexual relationship. Judith Yarnall categorizes their relationship as either Odysseus' domination over Circe as an aggressor or her domination over him (and all his men) as part of an inherent male inferiority in the face of her primordial feminine divinity.⁴⁶ These scholars' arguments perpetuate Circe as a sexualized character by presenting her relationships with men as indicating that she is inherently sexual.

Nancy Felson- Rubin and Laura Slatkin present Circe's year-long sexual relationship with Odysseus as a dangerous and pleasurable adventure which becomes incorporated into his survivor's tale.⁴⁷ This means that Circe is primarily a sexual obstacle to Odysseus' return to Penelope. Yarnall, who wrote a comprehensive book on Circe titled, *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress*, presents the goddess as a symbol of men's fear, desire, and bodily vulnerability, which is represented by Odysseus having sex with Circe.⁴⁸ Yarnall, Rubin and Slatkin all present Circe as a primordial divinity connected to nature, as in Homer, but also as a primarily sexualized character, unlike in Homer.

⁴⁵ See Foley, 107.

⁴⁶ See Yarnall 1995, esp. 21.

⁴⁷ See Felson and Slatkin, 105. Odysseus's tale places Circe as an obstacle which he must overcome.

⁴⁸ See Yarnall, 2. Wherein she argues that Circe's superiority to Odysseus as a goddess is shown in their sexual relationship.

Erich Neumann presents Circe as a witch, a hostile figure, and a priestess of drunkenness, ecstasy, hunger, and madness.⁴⁹ Neumann's summarization of Circe's characteristics reflect the longstanding legacy of Circe's post-Homeric hyper-sexualization (as discussed earlier). Seth Schein writes that Circe is one of the "threatening" females with whom Odysseus befriends once he overcomes them; Odysseus' journey is full of these threatening and dangerous females who are "symbolically sexual."⁵⁰ Schein considers Circe as a dangerous "non-human" female who is displayed by "prototypically" female activities such as weaving.⁵¹ Again, like Circe's island, and her connections to nature, her weaving is also interpreted as part of her sexualized character, while it does not work the same for Penelope, who is famous for her weaving in Homer and later this is used as a sign of her wisdom.

Schein writes that Circe "invites" Odysseus into an explicitly sexual relationship, and Penelope, by contrast, is a "beneficent version" of the "seductive and dangerous" non-human females that Odysseus encounters during his journey.⁵² On her own, without Odysseus, Circe is depicted as a sexually aggressive figure whose sexual allure is a danger to Odysseus—showing that the post-Homeric dichotomization of Circe and Penelope continues in modern scholarship.

Even female scholars who argue in favour of Circe or try to examine her from an alternate perspective still consider her a highly sexualized figure in Homer. Circe is a central fixture in Helen P. Foley's Chapter titled "Women in Love," wherein it is noted that "erotic dalliance with Circe" becomes of central importance in the *Odyssey*.⁵³ Notably, Penelope is missing from this chapter because she is not considered a figure in love. Foley continues that

⁴⁹ See Neumann, 10.

⁵⁰ See Schein and Nagler, 19.

⁵¹ See Schein, 19.

⁵² See, Schein (1995), 20.

⁵³ See Foley (2005), 115

“Circe... hold[s] Odysseus on [her] remote island, locked in obscurity, through seductive care and sexuality.”⁵⁴ This contradicts Circe’s lack of resistance and aid to Odysseus when he wishes to leave her in the *Odyssey* as discussed above. Although Circe is considered inherently erotic, scholarship does connect her to her island and nature but sees this connection as symbolically sexual. Circe’s island is an extension of her female allure, which as Edith Hall argues, “subordinates the eventually unwilling male to the female” and eventually “reduces him to bestiality,” which is something that Circe does to all those who visit her island, *except* Odysseus.⁵⁵ Again, scholarship argues the Circe’s power as an autonomous divinity is show the inherent inferiority of males.

Circe is presented again as a primarily sexual character by Edith Hall, who considers her to be “erotically linked” with Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. However, she also notes that this reflects a “dichotomized view of women as idealized brides and loyal wives [such as]...Penelope or as seedy, sexually demanding *femmes fatales* [such as]...Circe.”⁵⁶ According to Hall and Lorna Hardwick, those females presented by Homer as sexually predatory include Circe; in contrast, Penelope is a “loyal, domesticated and maternal” figure.⁵⁷ The attention paid to Circe’s sexual relationship with Odysseus is a theme in modern scholarship and ancient texts, in the same way that ancient writers and modern scholars present Homer’s Penelope as desexualized. As a result, Circe continues to be seen as an inherently sexual character in Homer.

This first chapter has presented Penelope’s and Circe’s representation in the *Odyssey* and a summary of their receptions in modern post-Homeric literature and scholarship. The

⁵⁴ See Foley (2005), 107

⁵⁵ See again, Foley (2005), 107.

⁵⁶ See Hall (1987), 193.

⁵⁷ See Hall 2012, 109 and Kazantzis 1999, 7. See also Hardwick, 2000 whole work as ana analysis of why Penelope is the archetype of the ideal and faithful wife, which does not include being highly sexually desirable or alluring.

presentation of Penelope's appearance in the *Odyssey* establishes that she is overtly sexualized in Homer, and a summary of her presentation in modern scholarship and post-Homeric writing shows her desexualization. Conversely, for Circe, this chapter has established that the goddess is not overtly sexualized in the *Odyssey*. However, she is presented as such in post-Homeric literature and modern scholarship. Ultimately, this forms a dichotomy between Penelope and Circe, which is not in Homer but remains prevalent today. Subsequent analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005) and *Circe/Mud Poems* (1974), respectively, will show how Atwood's presentation of Penelope and Circe is a return to Homer, which elucidates how this post-Homeric dichotomy has affected our perception of these female figures in the *Odyssey*.

Chapter Two Atwood's Penelope

This chapter analyzes Margaret Atwood's version of Penelope in the *Penelopiad* (2005) as a faithful representation of Homer's Penelope, who is highly sexualized, desirable and in active command of her sexuality. Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005) alongside the *Odyssey* will demonstrate how Atwood does not partake in Penelope's post-Homeric desexualization (as shown in Chapter One). Instead, Atwood's version of Penelope penetrates patriarchal narratives, which have distorted Homer's version of Penelope by removing the sexual aspect of her character.

Like Atwood, other modern authors have adopted the Homeric Penelope and recreated her as a woman with agency, including Dorothy Parker's *Penelope* (1936), Edwin Muir's *The Return of Odysseus* (1965), Linda Pastan's *You are Odysseus* (1982), Katha Pollitt's *Penelope Writes* (1982), and A.E Stallings' *The Wife of the Man of Many Wives*. However, Atwood is distinct from these authors because she does not inherit Penelope's post-Homeric desexualization. Instead, she presents Penelope with her own sexual agenda, just as in the Homeric *Odyssey*.

Atwood's Penelope narrates from her present state in the Underworld, where she addresses the events of the *Odyssey* as the historic past. The Underworld allows Penelope to examine the events of the *Odyssey* from an enlightened state, with the wisdom, gained both from the time that has passed and her removal from the physical setting itself.⁵⁸ Penelope's narrative is a reflection on her life, including reminiscing and commenting on her present state after death: "now that I'm dead, I know everything" (*Pen*,1). By presenting the events of the *Odyssey* from her own memories, Penelope has special authority over any other version because she was there; before

⁵⁸ See Neethling 2015, 117-118. Because Penelope is now separated by time and place, she can examine the events of the *Odyssey* from the exterior which gives her the knowledge of someone looking in from the outside.

now, her version has not been told.⁵⁹ In contrast with different post-Homeric literature and modern scholarship, Atwood's Penelope tells her version of her life, which includes the events of the *Odyssey* and how in Homer, she commanded her power as a highly sexualized figure.

Atwood's Underworld gives Penelope a space where her sexual fidelity no longer matters because she has no physical body. Because of this, she is free to stray from the narrative of the *Odyssey*, which demands her sexual loyalty.⁶⁰ In the Underworld, Penelope narrates without concern for her loyal reputation, telling her version from her present state of "bonelessness, liplessness, and breastlessness" (*Pen*, 1). Penelope's distinct "breastlessness" signifies freedom from her female body. Without a body, Penelope can challenge the sexual double standards of ancient Greece that punish women for sex while allowing men (here Odysseus) sexual liberties.⁶¹ The significance of Penelope's lack of a body to her ability to speak freely makes clear how pivotal her physical body is in Homer's narrative and all others which follow. Atwood liberates Penelope from the restraints of her female body, which allows her to examine how her sexual fidelity coexists with her sexual desirability in Homer. This is shown by post-Homeric versions of Penelope, such as Plato's and Ovid's, which remove all aspects of sex from Penelope's character in favour of idolizing her sexual restraint, as discussed in Chapter One.

The *Penelopiad* addresses a myth wherein women are either domestic and submissive or infamous for their duplicity and disloyal schemes.⁶² Penelope brings this forth in her narrative when she presents her cousin Helen (of Troy), who is known for duplicity and infidelity.⁶³ By

⁵⁹ See Massoura 2017, 408.

⁶⁰ See Hutcheon, 1994, 218-219. There is much scholarly discourse surrounding the psychological effect of Penelope's perspective from the underworld. Stael argues that Penelope's perspective from the underworld is suggestive of the unconscious while Linda Hutcheon writes that the *Penelopiad* is a parody which is "repetition with critical difference."

⁶¹ See Massoura 2017, 408 and Wisker 1994, 108-09. Atwood's Underworld provides an authoritative space where Penelope can reclaim her narrative through separation from her physical body.

⁶² See Howells 2008, 9.

⁶³ See Chapter One for an analysis of Helen's and Clytemnestra's mythologies.

comparing herself to Helen, Penelope explores the contradiction of characteristics of mythical women created by gender stereotypes, which use sexual activity to categorize women as either “good” or “bad.”⁶⁴ Howells argues that the *Penelopiad* addresses the dichotomy of female characteristics in myth, which considers female faithfulness and submissiveness as “good” and sexual activity in the absence of one’s husband as, duplicitous, perilous, and therefore “bad.”⁶⁵ Penelope’s comparison of herself to Helen in the *Penelopiad* functions to question a patriarchal dichotomy of female sexual activity, wherein Penelope herself represents “good” while Helen represents the “bad.” This dichotomy was shown in Chapter One as part of Penelope’s de-sexualization (and Circe’s hyper-sexualization). Atwood does not partake in this tradition; in her narrative, Penelope expresses jealousy over Helen’s beauty, regretting that she herself didn’t cause any scandals (*Pen*, 21-22).⁶⁶

Atwood’s Penelope describes Helen as “poison on legs... [who could] brandish one of her pearly breasts and have Menelaus on his knees” (*Pen*, 39/79). This narrative return to breasts returns attention to the importance of the physical female body as highly desirable. Furthermore, Atwood’s Penelope confesses her bitterness towards the fact that Helen’s manipulation of her sexual appeal allows her to escape all consequences of her adultery, unlike herself, whose command over her sexual desirability relates to her de-sexualization after Homer (*Pen*, 22). As Scholar Gabriel Neethling argues, Atwood’s use of Helen effectively criticizes the patriarchy by having Penelope comment on Helen’s behaviour and, subsequently, reveal her secret sexual fantasies and regrets.⁶⁷ In Homer, Penelope is entirely faithful to Odysseus *and* sexually

⁶⁴ See Howells 2008, 9.

⁶⁵ Again refer to Howells 2008, 9.

⁶⁶ See Chapter One for further analysis. Penelope is rarely presented as plain, and still sexualized. In Homer she appears only as enchanting, while in Atwood she plays down her own beauty but is still highly sexualized. As mentioned in Chapter One, Ovid, whose Penelope is described as “*rusticus*” or “rustic” also presents Penelope as plain and less desirable.

⁶⁷ See Neethling 2015, 117

objectified by the suitors. Penelope and Helen, as possessors of female bodies, are subject to similar sexual objectification. Thus, Atwood's Penelope reflects Homer because she actively speaks of how she was sexually desired.

Atwood's Penelope covets the suitor's attentions, writing: "I can't pretend I didn't enjoy a certain amount of this" (*Pen*, 104). Atwood's Penelope presents herself as sexually interested as she debates which suitors she may have chosen and which she found more desirable: "I have to admit... I occasionally daydreamed about which one I would rather go to bed with, if it came to that" (*Pen*, 105). Penelope exposes internal sexual desires, which respond to Homer's narrative, by showing how all of Penelope's actions secured her own reputation and safety as much as aiding Odysseus.

Penelope's criticism of Helen can also be explained by the latter's removal from women's domestic and private space when she leaves Sparta, her marriage home, for Troy.⁶⁸ Helen's removal from this female-dominated space separates her from Penelope, who never leaves the domestic space of her home. Atwood's Penelope reflects on her mythologies and this dichotomy. As Penelope writes, "what did I become, an edifying legend, a stick used to beat other women with" (*Pen*, 1). Comparing herself to Helen Penelope elucidates a patriarchal dichotomy whereby women are stereotypically "good" or "bad."⁶⁹ Atwood's Penelope knows she is highly sexualized in Homer yet entirely faithful; her jealousy of Helen amplifies how post-Homeric myths de-sexualize her while hyper-sexualizing other female characters such as Helen (and Circe).

Book Nineteen: Penelope's Deceitful Weaving

⁶⁸ See Lin Foxhall explains the phenomenon as follows: "understanding of the depictions of Penelope and Helen in theatre texts is the idea of space, and how space for the ancient Greeks was divided into the public and the private, which corresponded with masculine and feminine attributes." Foxhall 2013.

⁶⁹ Helen only appears in the *Odyssey* in book 4. 183 and book 23. 218.

Atwood's Penelope recounts how she avoided remarrying during Odysseus' absence through her weaving, which protected herself as much as it did her husband. Penelope describes her weaving as "so extremely pious" that "no one could oppose my task" (*Pen*, 113). Book Nineteen of the *Odyssey* recounts Penelope's weaving scheme. Atwood's Penelope addresses how she and her weaving scheme were central to Odysseus' successful return as the centre of authority in his *oikos* (*Od.* 19, 73-75). Penelope's weaving is representative of female-gendered roles in ancient Greece, which confined her to the domestic space of the *oikos*. Now that she is freed from these restraints by her present position in the Underworld, she can speak of her weaving without concern for her loyal reputation. Atwood's Penelope credits herself for weaving, whereas Athena inspires her weaving scheme in the *Odyssey*. Atwood's Penelope says that she "used to say it was Pallas Athene... who'd given [her] this idea... crediting some god for one's inspiration is a good way to avoid accusations of pride... or blame" (*Pen*, 112). Penelope confesses she gave credit to Athena for her weaving plan to "postpone the day of decision, without reproach to [her]self" (*Pen*, 112). Atwood's Penelope is aware that weaving a funeral shroud for Odysseus' father shows her devotion to her marriage family by preserving the *oikos* of Odysseus. Furthermore, her weaving scheme amplifies her role as the ideal wife by performing her female role in funeral rites.⁷⁰ Atwood's Penelope shows that her weaving effectively saved her from skepticism about her loyal reputation in the face of the suitor's desires.

Penelope's weaving supports her sexual desirability in Homer, not contradicting it because she shows how her actions in the *Odyssey* can be seen not as proof of her reason but as security against accusations of infidelity in the face of her own sexual desires and her sexual desirability.

⁷⁰ See Massoura 2017, 143.

In the *Odyssey*, Athena inspires Penelope to begin weaving the funeral shroud for Laertes and to unravel it by night so she can successfully prolong deciding about the suitors for three years before her trick is discovered (*Od.* 19, 150). Again, Atwood's Penelope claims sole responsibility for her weaving, which removes Athena's association with her weaving, and shows how it preserves her reputation as much as it serves Odysseus.

Penelope's use of reason to avoid remarrying is also crucial to Odysseus' return to Ithaca as a beggar. Unbeknownst to Penelope, Odysseus has infiltrated the palace and has been berated by palace maids and suitors (*Od.* 19, 325). Penelope receives news of this and, as a gracious host, holds a reception with beggar Odysseus, after which an essential sequence of events takes place: Penelope decides to remarry and proposes that the suitors compete for her hand by stringing Odysseus' bow, which he alone can string (*Od.* 19, 80). As with the weaving, Atwood's Penelope claims responsibility for the bow-stringing contest because she knew the beggar was Odysseus: "now... you've heard the plain truth. I knew that only Odysseus would be able to perform the archery-trick...there was no coincidence. I set the whole thing up on purpose" (*Pen.*, 139). While in the *Odyssey*, Penelope's arrangement of the bow-stringing contest happens before her recognition of Odysseus is made explicit.

Atwood's Penelope shows how she can seemingly abide by gendered stereotypes of the *Odyssey*, while also allowing Odysseus to play a part in her plan to kill the suitors because she appears in Homer as outwitted. Penelope explains that the contest was *her* idea, not a divinely inspired epiphany in which she arranged to "flatter" Odysseus by "consulting him for advice" (*Pen.*, 138). Although Penelope does not distinctly recognize Odysseus in Homer, Atwood's Penelope shows that regardless, in Homer, her sexual desirability fuels her need to prove her sexual loyalty.

Much scholarly debate surrounds Penelope's motivations for her decision to remarry, which led to the bowstringing contest. Emelyn Jones argues that Penelope's recognition of Odysseus in the *Odyssey* is gradual and subconscious. Anne Amory, concurs with Jones, arguing that Penelope's fear of making a mistake prevents her from being confident that the beggar is Odysseus, and that the recognition of Odysseus is, therefore, on a subconscious level.⁷¹ However, assuming that Penelope's recognition is subconscious undermines her sexual desirability in Homer since it disregards that the function of the bow-stringing contest effectively prevents her sexual disloyalty. Every action in the *Odyssey*—especially Book Nineteen—is guided by Penelope's thought that the beggar might be Odysseus.⁷² In the *Penelopiad*, Penelope makes explicit what is implicit in Homer: all her actions are because she knows the beggar is Odysseus, which is indicated by her confidence to meet him alone and risk her reputation. Penelope's role in Odysseus' homecoming is deeply intertwined with the suitor's deaths and the hanging of the maids in Book Twenty-Two of the *Odyssey* (*Od.* 22, 470).

Book Twenty-Two: Penelope and the Death of the Maids

Penelope's consciousness about the bow-stringing contest makes her complicit in the subsequent deaths of both the suitors and the maids. This is present in Homer because she knows that the consequence of disloyalty is death, which is shown when she scolds a maid for her insults towards beggar-Odysseus: "you will wipe away your nerve, your... audacity with your own life" (*Od.* 19, 95). In the *Odyssey*, the suitors have sexual relationships with the maids and the maids partake in insulting beggar Odysseus, thus proving their disloyalty to him because they are acting in agreeance with the suitors (*Od.* 18, 326). After Odysseus and Telemachus murder the suitors in a final fight, Odysseus orders Telemachus to dispense of the maids, after which the

⁷¹ See Amory 1963, 101.

⁷² See Winkler 1990, 143.

latter hangs them to death (*Od.* 22, 470). Atwood's *Penelopiad* devotes much attention to the maids who have ten self-narrated choruses throughout the novel.

Atwood's presentation of Penelope's perspective in juxtaposition with the maids' choruses implicitly undermines Penelope's self-presentation as a faithful wife. The choruses XXI and XXVI, both focus on Penelope's infidelity. Effectively, the maids' choruses question Penelope as a clever and faithful wife by providing an alternate version of Penelope's story.⁷³ This symbolizes Penelope's sexualized character in Homer in contrast with her de-sexualization after Homer; this shows how Penelope's sexual desirability is inextricable from her actions in the *Odyssey*.

In *Perils of Penelope*, a maid who is playing the role of Penelope tells a maid in the role of Eurycleia: "Nurse, it's really up to you to save me, because you're the only one he'll trust. Point out those maids as feckless and disloyal" (*Pen*, 150). Atwood's Penelope denies her infidelity throughout her narrative, but in the maid's chorus, she is accused of sleeping with a suitor and using Eurycleia as an accomplice to place the blame for her infidelity on the maids (*Pen*, 150). The maid's death is part of Penelope's preservation as sexually loyal. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope resolves to intervene on the maids' behalf to prevent their hanging, but she is absent during their deaths and fails to interpose herself at any junction (*Pen*, 175-85). The maids' chorus reveals that Penelope's inactivity effectively became their death sentence.⁷⁴ The maids fulfilled the suitor's sexual desires because they were sexually available, fulfilling the role that Penelope could not. Because the maids' parts in the suitor's sexual desires could easily have been an act of survival, their collective chorus shows how they are generalized subjects in the male-dominant social construct of Odysseus' *oikos*, in which their hanging was a normal

⁷³ See Hauser 2018, 123.

⁷⁴ See Massoura 2017, 406.

consequence of the sexual infidelity of their bodies.⁷⁵ In the *Penelopiad*, the maid's death results from Penelope's disloyalty, making explicit what is potentially implicit in the *Odyssey* and asserting the sexual desirability of Homer's Penelope. Atwood also brings forth Penelope's general lack of punishment towards the maids in Odysseus' absence in Homer. Penelope says that some say that the lack of punishment to the maids was proof that she had indulged in the same sluttiness herself (*Pen*, 145). Again, Atwood's Penelope neither denies nor indulges any proof that she *wasn't* disloyal, all the while affirming that she was sexually desired in the *Odyssey*.

Atwood's Penelope explains her hesitance at accepting Odysseus' identity before testing him, writing that she was "happy to foster the notion of the hardness of her heart, as it would reassure Odysseus to know [she] hadn't been throwing [herself] into the arms of every man who'd turned up claiming to be him" (*Pen*, 170). Penelope spends much of her narrative asserting her fidelity to Odysseus by addressing myriad ancient myths concerning her fidelity, which, as she says, have been "going the rounds for the past two or three thousand years" (*Pen*, 143).⁷⁶ Odysseus' decision not to reveal himself to her upon his homecoming is explained by Penelope, who assures the reader that all accusations of infidelity are falsities and that "Odysseus didn't reveal himself to me because he didn't trust me ... but the real reason was that he was afraid I would cry and give him away" (*Pen*, 145).⁷⁷ Atwood's Penelope explains that Odysseus knew her "tender heart, and habit of dissolving to tears... surely that is the obvious explanation for this

⁷⁵ See Massoura 2017, 143.

⁷⁶ The next myth accuses her of sleeping with all the suitors and the subsequent birth of the god Pan. Ancient scholars Pindar, Apollodorus, Herodotus, Cicero and Hyginus and also Maurus Servius Honoratus a commentator on Vergil claimed Penelope slept with all 108 suitors, and subsequently gave birth to Pan.

⁷⁷ Pausanias (unfaithful and exiled) Horace, Ovid, Plautus, Propertius, Martial and Statius all mention Penelope in one or more of their works. Subsequently this has led Penelope in the Middle Ages to being established as the quintessential wife, which is affirmed by Penelope being named by St. Jerome as one of the *pagan* women *famed* for their *chastity*.

behaviour” (*Pen*, 145). Atwood’s Penelope hints at Odysseus’ mistrust of her, which makes her repetitive assertions of fidelity appear as a shaky cover-up to his suspicions. Again, Atwood shows how all of Penelope’s actions point towards protecting her loyal reputation against the desires of the suitors.

Finally, in Chorus XXIV of the maids Atwood creates a trial for their hanging in a modern courtroom. Penelope is called a witness and professes that “it wasn’t the fact of their being raped ... it’s that they were raped without permission” (*Pen*, 181). The trial of the maids’ sequence accentuates the relevance in contemporary space of the ancient double standard in the *Odyssey* that doesn’t allow female sexual infidelity but allows male sexual infidelity. The maids’ chorus undermine Penelope’s entire self-presented narrative of loyalty by providing testimony from the perspective of those she’s killed.⁷⁸ The maids’ chorus is a testimony of the criminalization of female sexual activity in the face of the idealization of female sexual loyalty. In the *Odyssey*, the sexual disloyalty of the maids is treated as a threat to the prosperity of Odysseus’ household, while Penelope’s fidelity, despite fanning her sexual desirability, is a pillar of maintaining Odysseus’ *oikos*. By narrating from the Underworld, Atwood’s Penelope transcends the time in which the Homeric narrative is confined and presents archaic roles (of class distinguishment) that justified her part in the maids’ deaths and now reveals her actions as equally treacherous to those of Telemachus and Odysseus.⁷⁹ Like Telemachus and Odysseus who hung the maids in the *Odyssey*, the *Penelopiad* shows that Penelope was also an accomplice in the maids’ deaths.

Atwood presents a Penelope who represents how central to Homer’s Penelope is her sexual desirability. Atwood shows how all Penelope’s actions in the *Odyssey* safeguard her reputation as

⁷⁸ See Hauser 2018, 123.

⁷⁹ See Hauser 2018, 122.

loyal to Odysseus, affirming that she *is* highly sexualized in Homer. This shows how Penelope's post-Homeric de-sexualization obscures the true role of Penelope in the *Odyssey*. Because Atwood does not partake in the tradition of de-sexualizing Penelope, Penelope's role in the *Odyssey* as a highly sexualized figure is brought into the spotlight. This coincides with the dichotomization of women in ancient literature as either "good" or "bad." As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Penelope compares herself with Helen. This extends to Penelope being compared to other female figures in the *Odyssey*, such as Circe, who is the next chapter's topic.

Chapter Three

Atwood's Circe

This final chapter analyzes Margaret Atwood's *Circe/Mud poems* (1974) alongside the *Odyssey* to elucidate how Atwood's Circe is faithful to Homer's because she is not a hyper-sexualized figure. Atwood does not partake in the post-Homeric tradition of hyper-sexualizing Circe, which she addresses by responding to, but not retelling, the events of the *Odyssey*. Instead, Atwood presents Circe foremost as an autonomous goddess, which demonstrates how sexual aggression in post-Homeric literature becomes representative of her agency and inseparable from her character. Atwood's Circe is like Homer's because her sexual relationship with Odysseus does not define her; sex with Odysseus happens, but it doesn't change her nature, nor does it hinder Odysseus' return home. Atwood is a return to Homer because her Circe is not alluring or highly sexualized despite having sex with Odysseus. Analysis of Atwood's Circe alongside the *Odyssey* will elucidate how Circe's post-Homeric hyper-sexualization obscures her true role in the *Odyssey*.

Atwood's Circe speaks for herself by narrating in the first person, unlike Circe's story in the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus narrates. By having Circe speak for herself, narrative authority is taken away from Odysseus so that she can recount the *Odyssey's* events from her perspective. Circe narrates from the present-day, which is indicated by the presence of modern objects throughout her narrative, such as "steam engines and plane crashes" (*C/Mp*, 47). This conflation of time functions similarly in the *Penelopiad*, wherein Penelope gains narrative authority by telling her version from the Underworld, which places the events of the *Odyssey* (and other mythologies) in the historical past. Circe also exercises her narrative authority by never addressing Odysseus by name; she addresses "you," which effectively transcends the bounds of

time and place by appearing to address the reader themselves and all those involved in her mythology. Atwood's conflation of time exhibits the relevance of ancient themes in contemporary literary space, emphasizing the ongoing prevalence of Circe's hyper-sexualization.⁸⁰

Circe/Mud poems also transcends the mythical boundaries of the *Odyssey* by referring to other stories from Circe's mythology. For example, Atwood's Circe writes that she is no longer interested in "men with heads of eagles...pig-men, or those who can fly with...wax and feathers" (*C/Mp*, 47) — showing that Circe has no interest in heroes, such as Icarus, and their myths, which always place them at the narrative's center.⁸¹ Atwood's Circe takes control of her story and shows her power to "see beyond her relationships to the persons, things, and events called reality."⁸² In the clutch of their stories, like disease, these heroes are "helpless" (*C/Mp*, 64). She is sick of heroes and their myths, which is a type of story wherein, "he" is "protected" and does not change (*C/Mp*, 54).⁸³ Unlike herself, who is not changed from story to story.⁸⁴ To Circe all these heroes are protected by their stories, while she is not, thus she is subject to their depictions of her, for better or for worse. By narrating for herself from the present, Atwood's Circe can show how these myths effect our understanding of her.

Circe makes the stories of heroes from her mythologies synonymous with one another by writing that there's "no use telling me this isn't a story or not the same story" (*C/Mp*, 68).

⁸⁰ See Leigh 2006, 98 and, Lauter 1984, 63.

⁸¹ Such as the myth of the master craftsmen Daedalus and his son Icarus who attempted escape from Crete by the means of wings which were constructed of wax and feathers, see Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8. Also see Rhodius' *Argonautica* for the story of Jason and Medea travelling to Circe's Island to seek her transformative processes.

⁸² See Lauter 1984, 62.

⁸³ See Joseph Campbell's, "*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*" which presents a persuasive argument that the quest is the monomyth of western culture and how this type of myth and their heroes dominates the Western World.

⁸⁴ See Chapter One for analysis of post-Homeric poet's version of Circe. For example, Homer's Circe is transformed in Vergil's *Aeneid* into a dangerous temptress best to be avoided.

Circe/Mud poems is not this type of story because Circe is not a hero recounting their quest; Atwood does not re-tell the events of the *Odyssey*. Rather, she responds to Homer by changing the narrative perspective, which allows the limitations of quest myths (such as Odysseus' in the *Odyssey*) and her portrayal in them to be re-evaluated.⁸⁵ Circe's narrative perspective allows us to look beyond post-Homeric representations of her and explore her role in the *Odyssey* through a new lens. Circe, unlike Homer in the *Odyssey*, begins her narrative by stating that the journey to her island is smooth and easy but describes her island as "burned and sparse" (*C/Mp*, 46). Circe shows how the narrative can vastly differ depending on who tells the story. To the hero (here Odysseus), the island appears lush and idyllic, while to Circe, it is burned and sparse. Circe can appear as one thing while being something entirely different; she can be portrayed as sexually aggressive in post-Homeric literature when in Homer, she is not. By doing this, Atwood's Circe de-stabilizes her portrayal in her mythologies so that she can shed light on her true character.

Atwood's Circe emphasizes her connection to nature over her sexual relations with Odysseus. Like Homer, Atwood presents Circe foremost as a goddess whose divinity is closely connected to nature rather than as an alluring temptress. Circe writes that "people [come] from all over to consult me... they offer me their pain... hoping in return for a word" (*C.Mp*, 49). Circe points out that she is not sought as a temptress but for words.⁸⁶ As Atwood's Circes writes, heroes, come and leave with their stories of her. None of the heroes in her mythologies seek her for sex, including Odysseus.⁸⁷ Circe's sexual relations with Odysseus do not define her; she asks

⁸⁵ See Lauter 1984, 62.

⁸⁶ See *Argonautica*, 5. 659. For example, as shown in Chapter One, Circe is purposefully avoided by Vergil's hero Aeneas as a demonic temptress, while in Rhodius' *Argonautica*, she is sought for her powers as a witch. Refer to Chapter One of this thesis for full analysis.

⁸⁷ See Chapter One, wherein none of the post-Homeric myths have their heroes seek Circe for sex.

the reader to ask at her temples, “who keeps the wind, ask what is sacred” (*C/Mp*, 51). She implores the reader to see her true nature. By addressing “you,” she also begs the reader to see beyond her hyper-sexualization and return to Homer to see how she is foremost an autonomous divinity.

Circe’s divinity is represented again by Atwood’s creation of the “fist,” which “withered and strung” around Circe’s neck. The “fist...holds on to [her]” and “commands [his] transformation” (*C/Mp*, 57). The fist represents what has been stripped away from her through her hyper-sexualization, and now that she is in narrative control, she demands the transformation of the quest myth. Edith Hall argues that through the “fist,” Atwood has retained Homer’s narrative by relocating the sexual control and violence in the patriarchal world of the *Odyssey* into the “fist.”⁸⁸ Like Hall, Judith Yarnall argues that Odysseus is an aggressor because his breaking of the “fist” breaks Circe’s connection with her ancient powers, effectively making her give up her protection before he removes his own.⁸⁹ Hall’s and Yarnall’s arguments place Circe under patriarchal authority in the *Odyssey*, which she is not (as shown in Chapter One).⁹⁰ However, Atwood’s Circe shows how the nature of his story protects Odysseus, but she has been unprotected from change. Circe writes that the “arm feels pain, but the severed hand clutches at freedom” (*C/Mp*, 58). Symbolically, the severed hand represents what has been stripped from her through hyper-sexualization; the myths of his quest exploited her, forcing her role as an autonomous divinity in Homer to be renounced as anything other than one of Odysseus’ lovers.

⁸⁸ See Hall 1995, 1.

⁸⁹ See Yarnall 1995, 189.

⁹⁰ As shown in Chapter One, Circe is an autonomous divinity who lives beyond the patriarchal world where Odysseus belongs. In her first appearance in book ten, Circe is presented as a “beautiful, dreadful goddess” who lives alone on her island, *Aiaia* (*Od.* 10. 138-40). Later on in her final appearance, her and Odysseus’ relationship ends peacefully, and Circe does not question Odysseus’ will to go (*Od.* 10. 530-35).

Estella Lauter imbues the meaning of the “fist” with an emotional layer by arguing that Odysseus’ unbuckling of the “fist” frees Circe from a “dehumanizing pattern of action.”⁹¹ Odysseus does not free her from these myths, she frees herself by telling her own story. The nature of his quest-myth protects him through his status as the hero and his role as a conqueror. This is shown in Chapter One, where Alcman, who is contemporary to Homer, does not demonize Circe for her sexual relations with Odysseus compared to post-Homeric poets. As Chapter One establishes, Circe is not hyper-sexualized in the *Odyssey*; this happens later, wherein her role as a temptress protects the hero, including Odysseus, as the cause of their sexual relationships with her.⁹²

Circe also expresses that even if she desired Odysseus (or any other hero), she does not desire their stories. She says that she “made no choice ...[and] decided nothing” (*C/Mp*, 50). She is not alluring or highly desired and reflects upon her hospitality towards Odysseus and his crew in Homer by saying that she gave him water and “flesh ...[which she] abdicate[d]” and which he “claim[ed] without noticing” because he knew “how to take” (*C/Mp*, 54). She reflects on how her sexual relationship strips her of herself and eclipses her true character. Circe describes how she has been treated in these myths, “holding [her] arms down...[and her] head down by the hair – mouth gouging [her] face, and neck, fingers groping into [her] flesh” (*C/Mp*, 55). Circe removes herself as the cause of her post-Homeric hyper-sexualization derived from her sexual relations with Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. She asks, “why do you need this? What do you want me to admit?” (*C/Mp*, 55). Through her sexual relations with Odysseus, she is extorted. She writes, “look at me and see your reflection” she is transformed into something else, as she says, “my

⁹¹ See Lauter 1984, 64.

⁹² See Chapter One for post-Homeric poets, such as Xenophon, Apollonius Rhodius, Vergil, Ovid, St. Augustine hyper-sexualize Homer’s Circe.

face, my other faces” (*C/Mp*, 56). Atwood’s Circe constantly reminds the reader to consider how Circe’s depiction changes and to return to Homer to see how her sex with Odysseus does not define her in the *Odyssey*.

Circe’s hyper-sexualization creates Circe as dangerously alluring and sexually aggressive, which is vastly different from her character in Homer. In the *Odyssey*, Circe transforms Odysseus’ comrades into pigs (*Od.* 10. 230). Atwood’s Circe addresses the transformations by writing, “It was not my fault, these animals who were once lovers...they happened because I did not say anything” (*C/Mp*, 48).⁹³ In the *Odyssey*, Circe does not speak during the transformations; the men drink the potion, then she taps them with her staff, triggering their metamorphoses (*Od.* 10. 238). It was not her fault; they were products of his myth. Circe says that his creating a story is what most veterans would do, “filling in the dangers as you go... you add the details” (*C/Mp*, 64). Circe’s transformations are expressed in Atwood as a product of the hero’s myths about her. Thus, Atwood’s Circe affirms that she is not the cause of these transformations, she has no control over such stories and knows how these narratives control her representation.

Yarnall argues that the “nasty” metamorphoses from Circe’s potions are “the primordial feminine acting according to its nature and making manifest the comparative inferiority of individual male being.”⁹⁴ But, Circe’s transformations do not express male inferiority. Circe does not transform all travellers to her island, especially Odysseus. As discussed in Chapter One, aside from Homer, Circe’s other transformations typically happen as revenge for being

⁹³ See Chapter One for full analysis. Many of Circe’s myths include her transformation of men humans into beasts. After Homer, such as in Vergil and Ovid her transformations become vengeful and demonic,

⁹⁴ See Yarnall 1995, 21

abandoned by men.⁹⁵ Thus, after Homer, her transformations become representative of sexual aggression, but as Atwood's *Circe* points out, in Homer they are part of Odysseus' myth about her rather than a product of her true nature. Therefore, her transformations serve Odysseus more than represent herself by making him comparatively superior to his comrades in his own story.

Similar to Yarnall, Lauter argues that the men's transformations are caused by their own (sexual) drives, which lead to their skin becoming armour-like because their metamorphoses are a revelation of their interior selves.⁹⁶ Lauter, like Yarnall suggests that Circe's transformations symbolize a power imbalance between the sexes. Katherine Ann Porter's argument follows suit by arguing that the animality of the men does not arise from their transformation but from their inability to perceive any other mode of behaviour, which reveals the men's inmost nature.⁹⁷

These arguments suggest that men are inherently aggressive, which is what Circe aims to reveal, which also perpetuates Circe's hyper-sexualization by suggesting that her role in Homer responds to the sexual drives of the men. However, Atwood is in no way so reductive as to imply that everything male is inherently evil and everything female is inherently good.⁹⁸ *Circe/Mud poems* is a return to Homer. Despite being a subject of Odysseus' myth in Homer, Circe is not highly sexualized, as shown in Chapter One. As Atwood's *Circe* points out, her transformations do not indicate who she is; men are not the problem. The heroes' myths trap them and her. She says that their stories are like a disease, in whose clutches they are helpless (*C/Mp*, 64).

Atwood's *Circe* explores these myths by inventing her own myth, the "mud woman." The "mud woman" is a fabricated myth that is not in Homer, she represents the opposite of Circe by

⁹⁵ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 14, 320-396, wherein Circe transforms king Picus into a bird as revenge for her being abandoned by him.

⁹⁶ See Lauter 1984, 63

⁹⁷ See Porter 1955, 13

⁹⁸ See House 2006, 1

having no aspect of agency or autonomy but who is like Circe because she exists only as a myth created by man. Circe recounts that a traveller once told her that he and another boy constructed a woman from mud, who began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows; as she says, “they stuck to the essentials.” (*C/Mp*, 61). Circe continues to explain that once the sun had warmed the “mud woman,” the boys would make love to her and “take turns... afterwards they would repair her, making her hips more spacious [and] enlarging her breasts...” (*C/Mp*, 61). Circe explains that the traveller confessed that “his love for [the mud woman] was perfect...[and] that no woman since has equalled her.” (*C/Mp*, 61). Circe’s recount of the ‘mud woman’ as a story outside of Homer demonstrates how her post-Homeric hyper-sexualization is as reductive as the “mud woman,” constructed by men to have no purpose but to fulfil their sexual desires. Therefore, the “mud woman” symbolizes Circe’s sexual exploitation of her character in Homer, who is not highly sexualized.

Like Circe, the “mud woman” has been reshaped by men over time for their pleasure and to fulfill their desires.⁹⁹ Veronica Leigh-House says, “these boys shape their perfect woman to suit their purposes; her heedlessness is crucial: she can’t talk back.”¹⁰⁰ The “mud woman” cannot tell her own story. Therefore, she has no way to contend with her representation. The “mud woman” is a metaphor for Circe’s severance from her primordial connection. Circe relinquishes her “traditional” power, and, therefore she can only become a sexual object “modelled to the likeness of men’s desires.”¹⁰¹ In her narrative, Circe asks, “is this what you would like me to be, this mud woman?” (*C/Mp*, 61). The “mud woman” symbolizes Circe’s hyper-sexualization; if she remains silent, then the “mud woman” is what she will remain. By telling her own story,

⁹⁹See House 2006, 137

¹⁰⁰ See House 2006, 95

¹⁰¹ See Leporini 2015, 47

Circe presents a new way of looking at her mythology, which implores the reader to look beyond her hyper-sexualization and return to Homer to see what is truly there.

Following the story of the “mud woman,” Circe alludes to Penelope in her narrative by asking Odysseus, “whose face do you see? The first one, the one you thought you abandoned along with the furniture” (*C/Mp*, 65). Circe describes Penelope as sitting “in her chair... like a mother, waxing and waning... surrounded by bowls, bowls, bowls” (*C/Mp*, 65). Circe describes the suitors as “... having a good time in the kitchen: waiting for [Penelope] to decide on the dialogue for the evening, which will be in perfect taste and include both tea and sex, dispensed graciously at once” (*C/Mp*, 65). Circe shows how Penelope is sexually objectified, lusted after and possesses great sexual allure in Homer.

Circe’s presentation shows how Penelope solicits her sexual desirability and how she herself does not. House argues that Penelope is a lure for Odysseus, who “locks him into his myth” which then positions Circe as the ‘other woman’ thus, making his “inability to commit to her seem petty compared to his devotion to his wife.”¹⁰² House’s argument relies on Circe being emotionally invested in Odysseus and wishing to keep him for herself. However, as pointed out earlier, Atwood’s Circe states that she is uninterested in men, especially heroes such as Odysseus (*C/Mp*, 47). Instead, Circe is not opposed to Penelope in any other way than not being highly sexualized in Homer. Kathryn Vanspanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, “of special significance to Atwood is the suggestive ambiguity in the Homeric model of female figures who are simultaneously subordinate to male ones, yet powerful.”¹⁰³ Circe is powerful, but she is not subordinate to male power by nature, as shown by the “mud woman” instead, she is trapped by post-Homeric representations, which hyper-sexualize her. This scholarship interprets Atwood’s

¹⁰² See House 2006, 98.

¹⁰³ See VanSpanckeren and Castro 1988, 101.

adaption of Circe as loving Odysseus and being scorned by his love for Penelope, which inserts in both Homer and Atwood an emotional layer which is not there.

In the *Odyssey*, Penelope's version of the events that take place in Odysseus' absence is the only one heard. Atwood's Circe writes that Penelope is weaving a version which is "the one you will believe in [and] the only one you will hear" (*C/Mp*, 65). Atwood draws a parallel between Penelope's de-sexualization and Circe's hyper-sexualization. Circe contrasts her authority over her representation to that of Penelope. Circe never gets to recount the events of the *Odyssey* herself, since in Homer, she only appears as part of Odysseus' recount of his stay on her island (*Od.* Book 10). Therefore, Penelope's version of Ithaca during Odysseus' absence is the only one heard. Penelope's idolization, discussed in Chapter One, is connected to the fact that Penelope spoke for herself, thus making her actions of sexual fidelity appear as her genuine desires. By having her speak for herself, Atwood shows how Circe has had little authority over her presentations. By contrasting herself to Penelope, Circe shows how they are dichotomized after Homer, but if one looks closely, these two are not opposed in the *Odyssey*.

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood's *Circe/Mud poems* do not re-tell the events of the *Odyssey* but respond to them. Since neither Atwood nor Homer presents Circe as an inherently alluring or sexually aggressive being, Atwood is a return to Homer. Both present Circe foremost as an autonomous divinity deeply connected to nature and by doing so expose how she was hyper-sexualized after Homer. Atwood, by giving Circe narrative authority allows Circe herself to address how her hyper-sexualization after Homer allows her true character in the *Odyssey* to be obscured.

Conclusion

In the first chapter of this thesis, Homer's presentation of Penelope as a distinctly sexualized figure was established through an analysis of Penelope's appearances in the *Odyssey*. Following Homer's version of Penelope, an analysis of Penelope's presentation in post-Homeric literature from the ancient world demonstrates how Homer's Penelope was de-sexualized by ancient authors, followed by an overview of Penelope's presentation in modern scholarship. This shows the continuation of her de-sexualization into modern academic space. After establishing that Homer's Penelope has been de-sexualized by authors and academics alike, Chapter Two analyzed Margaret Atwood's version of Penelope in her 2005 novel the *Penelopiad*. I argue that Atwood's version of Penelope is like Homer's because both present her as a sexually alluring figure whose command over her sexual desirability is vital to her role in the *Odyssey*.

The second half of my first chapter analyzes Circe following the same steps with Penelope. Beginning with how the goddess appears in Homer as not highly sexual even though she and Odysseus have sex, that is followed by an analysis of Circe's appearance in post-Homeric literature and then in modern scholarship. My presentation of Circe in post-Homeric literature shows a hyper-sexualization of Homer's Circe, who is not overtly sexual in the *Odyssey*. Circe's hyper-sexualization is then presented as a trend which continues into modern scholarship. Finally, analysis of both Penelope and Circe shows a dichotomy between the two female characters, which is persistent in contemporary scholarship and post-Homeric literature but not in Homer.

Once Circe is established as hyper-sexualized after Homer, Chapter Two analyzes Margaret Atwood's version of Penelope in the *Penelopiad* alongside the *Odyssey* to show how Penelope is a highly sexualized character in Homer (2005). Finally, Chapter Three presents

Atwood's version of Circe in her 1974 work *Circe/Mud poems* alongside Homer's version of Circe in the *Odyssey* to show how Circe is not a highly sexualized character in Homer. Analysis of significant themes in Atwood's works alongside the *Odyssey* shows the effects of the post-Homeric versions of these female figures. By exposing the presence of a post-Homeric dichotomy between Penelope and Circe in post-Homeric literature, their true character in the *Odyssey* is no longer obscured.

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