



# Giving Voice to Women Oppressed by Their Own Strength: Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking in Circe's Poems by Louise Gluck

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## Abstract

Western literature is mostly founded on allusions to Classical and Greek myths. Myths are generally heralded as the reservoir of cultural history, anticipations, reservations, and passions of archetypal figures and incidents that each poetic generation seek to mine, reimagine and remake. Myths, however, tend to perpetuate misogynist notions about women's voices and portrayals which tend to marginalize women's voices in the history of Western Literary canon. In the twentieth century, Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking emerges as a feminist strategy to revise the representation of women in myths from a feministic approach. According to Alicia Suskin Ostriker in her foundational article "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," feminist revisionist mythmaking is "the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth". (74) In other words, feminist revisionist mythmaking is the activity of reclaiming, appropriating, and amending myths. It allows women poets to revise and redefine portrayals of female characters in myth, and by extension, to break through the confines of traditional gender roles and to correct a canonical legacy dominated by patriarchal values. Louise Gluck, the recipient of the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature, has frequently employed the feminist revisionist mythmaking strategy in her poetry by portraying female figures who have been trapped in their gender roles and oppressed in their intimate relationships through the patriarchal narratives. In so doing, Gluck investigates the assumptions, stereotypes, and missing voices of the silenced female characters in the original myths to reclaim these voices and present a form of literary justice to such female characters. This research paper aims to examine the revisionist mythmaking strategy employed by Louise Gluck in retelling Homer's Epic *Odyssey* in her Circe's poems from her collection of poetry, *Meadowlands* (1996). It seeks to demonstrate how in revising the female character of Circe, the tempting enchantress, Gluck criticizes Homer's original myth, resists the way female power is



vilified and gives voice to women commonly oppressed in the patriarchal Western tradition by their own power.

Keywords: Myth, Louise Gluck, poetry, Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking, Odyssey, feminist criticism, gender roles, inclusion

## Introduction

A myth is a classic or legendary story that usually focuses on a particular hero or event, and explains mysteries of nature, existence, or the universe with no true basis in fact. Myths exist in every culture; but the most well known in Western culture and literature are part of Classical and Greek mythology. The word 'myth' has its origin in the Greek word 'mythos', which means fable, legend or sagas. The term 'myth' as understood today has become known in the English language in the eighteenth century. The *Webster's Dictionary* (1982) defines myths as "an idea or story that is believed by many people but that is not true; a story that was told in an ancient culture to explain a practice, belief, or natural occurrence." *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1991) similarly defines myth as "a story which is not 'true' and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings. The characters in myths are usually gods, goddesses, warriors, and/or heroes who are often responsible for the creation and preservation of nature, as well as physical and emotional aspects of human existence—for example Zeus; the god of the sky and the earth and father of gods and men, and Aphrodite; the goddess of love and fertility. In the introduction of the *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* (1995), Robert Graves further explains that myth "justifies] an existing social system and account[s] for traditional rites and customs" (v). Similarly, in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (2005), David Leeming contends that "myths might be considered the most basic expressions of a defining aspect of the human species—the need and ability to understand and to tell stories to reflect our understanding, whether or not we now the real facts". (xii) Myths are, therefore, generally heralded as the reservoir of cultural history, anticipations, reservations, and passions of archetypal figures and incidents.

Myth has, therefore, always been considered an integral element of literature and the association between literature and myth is prominently important. On one hand, myth provides the world of literature a source of multi-layered compelling, captivating and startling stories, whereas literature, on the other hand, develops, adapts, and/or rewrites mythological elements into creative literary pieces. In addition, myth also offers the narrative strategies which literature evolves from as it is revealed in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where the term 'mythos' refers to plot, to a unified construct of required and probable actions. (Segal 23)

Mythological stories, however, have always been considered as male-oriented; where masculine prowess is generally glorified and idolized. Mythical images of women, on the other hand, are, often, if not always, typically stereotyped, oppressed, silenced and mostly marginalized. With the rise of feminist literary criticism and gender studies in the second half of the twentieth century, feminist critics have been concerned with an extensive investigation of the representation of women in myth. As feminist literary critics highlight, a female language, imagery and history have been missing in mythology where women are depicted from a male perspective with faded identity and unheeded voice. Feminist revisionist mythmaking, thus, emerges as a feminist strategy to revise and reclaim the representation of women in myths from a feministic approach.

Feminist revisionist mythmaking is defined as a strategic revisionist use of gender imagery and is a means of exploring and attempting to transform the self and the culture or, in other words, to "subvert and transform the life and literature women poets inherit". (Ostriker 211) In her 1972 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," Adrienne Rich defines 're-vision' as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new direction" and argues that 're-vision' is an important element in awakening the feminist consciousness. (18) Re-vision emerges as a necessity for women writers whose writings and self-identity have been shaped by a patriarchal canon composed of mythical images that "negate everything she is about: she meets the image of women in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream ... not herself" (21)



In her book, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America (1986)*, Alicia Suskin Ostriker argues that feminist revisionist mythmaking invades “the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for ‘male’ and ‘female’ are stored; to rewrite them from a female point of view is to discover new possibilities for meaning.” (211) Ostriker remarks that “the motivating force behind women writers’ revisionist myths is the subversion of the dominant ideology’s hidden male bias” (212). In her founding article, entitled “Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythology”, Ostriker introduces feminist revisionist mythmaking as a major feminist strategy of subverting patriarchal values by reclaiming, appropriating, and correcting myths. (213) It allows women writers the opportunity to re-define female identity and to make “corrections” to constructed “images of what women have collectively and historically suffered” (214) Hence, women writers employ this practice to “simultaneously deconstruct a prior myth or story and construct a new one which includes, instead of excludes, themselves” (214) It is through revisionist mythmaking that an exploration and a transformation of the self and culture at large is possible. Feminist revisionist mythmaking, thus, offers a significant means of redefining female identity and, consequently, of restructuring the Western literary canon.

According to Ostriker, there are different approaches that women writers employ in revising myths, ranging from “hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them” to portraying the female as a powerful destroyer, “a figure women’s poetry has always been inhibited from exploring in the past by the need to identify femininity and morality.” (222) In addition, Ostriker emphasizes four distinctive features that define works employing the feminist revisionist mythmaking strategy in their interactions with mythology. First, they treat prevailing texts as ‘fence posts surrounding the terrain of mythic truth’ but by no means identical to it. Second, they comprise a re-examination of the cultural values instilled in Western literature. Third, feminist revisionist mythmaking disparages the nostalgia for the ‘Golden Age’ often depicted by male modernist mythmakers. Finally, they experiment with new forms to craft a new tradition wherein female voices are recovered and well-accentuated. (Ostriker 235-238)

The impulse of feminist revisionist mythmaking as described by Ostriker reflects feminist criticism in many ways. In attempting to examine how old myths have historically oppressed women and what needs to be reimagined in order to bring myths into a new relevance for modern readers, feminist revisionist mythmaking echoes feminist criticism. According to Lois Tyson, feminist criticism “examines the ways in which literature and other cultural productions reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women.” (83) For years, women experiences are depicted through a male-authored representation of archetypal women which obscures the individuality of humanity, particularly of the female characters. Feminist revisionist mythmaking, thus, urges an acknowledgment of the traditional gender roles which have been perpetuated and an understanding of how to destabilize those roles which ‘cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive;’ while women are deemed ‘emotional irrational, weak, nurturing, and submissive.’ (85)

To adhere to the gender binary that is often presented in traditional mythical narratives as well as the gender roles they depict is to deny women the opportunity to determine for themselves their role in society. In revising old myths, feminist revisionist mythmaking, thus, opens a space in which women can identify outside the typical gender norms of the society shaped by the confines of patriarchy and can find better representation and reclaim voice. In doing so, feminist revisionist mythmaking enhances the feminist criticism long-term struggle with the lack of representation as well as the nuanced representation of the changing conceptions of womanhood and gender identity in the literary canon.

Louise Elisabeth Glück (B1943) is an American poet and writer who has a profound preoccupation with revisionist mythmaking strategy. Glück was awarded numerous prestigious awards including the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature and praised for “her unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal”. (!) Louise Glück has published twelve books of poetry over the period of fifty years from *Firstborn* in 1968 to *Faithful and Virtuous Night* in 2014. Her poetry is often anthologized, as in the *Vintage Contemporary American Book of Poetry* and *No More Masks: An Anthology of Twentieth Century American Women Poets*.



In her most celebrated books of poetry, Gluck reveals a continuous thought-provoking fascination with revisionist mythmaking strategy. The depth and breadth of her fascination is, however, fully realized in her 1997 poetry collection *Meadowlands*. In this collection of poetry, Gluck employs a revisionist mythmaking strategy to retell Homer's epic *Odyssey*. In her version, Gluck gives voice to one of the classical characters that surround Odysseus, the tempting enchantress, Circe. Gluck's featuring of Circe takes place over a series of three poems within *Meadowlands*: "Circe's Power," "Circe's Grief," and "Circe's Torment". In the original myth, Circe is typically marginalized subjected by her classical representation as a demonic female figure. She is depicted as the archetypal 'predatory' female who allures men with her magical abilities and sexual freedom. In her Circe's poems, however, Gluck employs feminist revisionist mythmaking to provide Circe with the opportunity to find a voice and/or a platform through which she can claim her own story by speaking in the first person, to resist and respond to the prevailing reputation she has been assigned for centuries.

This research paper aims to examine the revisionist mythmaking strategy employed by Louise Gluck in retelling Homer's Epic *Odyssey* in her Circe's poems from her collection of poetry, *Meadowlands* (1996). It seeks to demonstrate how in revising the female character of Circe, the tempting enchantress, Gluck criticizes Homer's original myth, resists the way female power is vilified and gives voice to women commonly oppressed in the patriarchal Western tradition by their own power.

## Discussion

Louise Gluck's Circe poems in her poetry collection *Meadowlands* (1997), depict the mythological enchantress, Circe, who falls in love with Odysseus in Homer's epic *Odyssey*, Books X and XII. According to Homer, Circe, an enchantress, is the daughter of Helios, the sun god, and of the ocean nymph Perse. She lives on her island, Aeaea, and is able by means of drugs and incantations to lure those who land on her island and then to transform them into animals. Odysseus visits her island on the way back from the Trojan War after she has his men changed into swine. Hermes, however, warns Odysseus of Circe's sorcery and gives him a herb called 'molu' to ward off Circe's enchantments. Upon meeting Circe, Odysseus makes her swear by the gods that she will return his men to their former shape. (Homer 375-387). Circe falls in love with Odysseus who spends one year with her. At the end of his time with her, Odysseus's men remind him that he is trying to get home and must leave Circe. Upon looking into the future and realizing that Odysseus must travel to the Underworld (the land of the dead), she advises Odysseus as to how to appease the gods and gives him the protections and abilities he will need in the underworld to communicate with the dead—all which will allow him to return home at the end of the quest (399).

Although Circe performs altruistic actions, she is inherently depicted as the archetypal 'predatory' female who lures pitiful and ingenuous men for no other reason than her power. She is often criticized and demonized for her magical abilities and her sexual freedom. In Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus' men meet Circe for the first time, the danger she represents is bluntly emphasized: "they heard her singing, lifting/ her spellbinding voice as she glided back and forth/ at her great immortal loom, her enchanting web/ a shimmering glory only goddesses can weave." (X 241-245) Although she is introduced as beautiful, singing and weaving, Circe's voice only serves to emphasize the magical looms and the feminine wiles that will endanger Odysseus' journey. She is presented not merely as seductive, but as 'a danger too,' one that "no one, god or mortal, dares approach." (VII 282)

The depiction of women in myths has been, in fact, typically categorized as either 'good girls', who are gentle, submissive, and angelic or 'bad girls', who are violent, worldly, and evil. A woman who refuses her patriarchal gender role is, therefore, only left with the role of a 'monster'. In Gluck's feminist revisionist mythmaking, Circe is given a voice and a platform through which she can resist this categorization and present herself as rather a multi-layered and complex character far beyond the black-and-white dichotomy of the 'good girl' and/or the 'bad girl' in the mythic narratives. In doing so, Gluck attempts to renounce the 'misogynistic club' of the 'bad girl' category to which Circe has been subjugated and suppressed over the years because of the way her female power threatens the male domination. Gluck employs the feminist revisionist mythmaking of Circe in a series of three poems in her poetry collection *Meadowlands* (1997): "Circe's Power," "Circe's Grief," and "Circe's Torment".



The first poem of Gluck's series is "Circe's Power". Although she integrates much of the original myth in the poem, such as Circe's supernatural powers and her affair with Odysseus, Gluck significantly revises the mythical character of Circe. In direct opposition with the original myth, Gluck utilizes Circe's own voice to present her as a female character with great rational wisdom who employs her supernatural power neither revengefully nor apathetically. She has a rationale for all her enchantments. The poem thus begins:

I never turned anyone into a pig.  
Some people are pigs; I make them  
Look like pigs.

In the poem, Circe is able to change the common mythological narratives about herself as a predatory temptress and shifts the blame to the men. She reveals her power as well as her character and clearly voices her reason for the transformations enchanted upon Odysseus's men. Circe explains that she does not turn men into 'pigs', for she does not transform them into something they are not. She simply rather exposes their true animalistic pig-like nature. The pig-like forms just reveal the interiors of these men which is not her doing.

The second stanza is fundamental in clarifying Circe's motivations for enchanting Odysseus' men. Her enchantments are prompted by their actions and, in a way, as a punishment for those who are swinish by nature. Circe expresses her anger and frustration with the world of these men. It is 'undisciplined' society that lacks control and enables these men to disguise themselves as something they are not. Circe declares: "I am sick of your world/ that lets the outside disguise the inside." In "your world," that is the world of Odysseus, men's true selves on the 'inside' are disguised by their outer appearances. Seeking no disguises, then, Circe reveals men's true inner nature to make their outer appearances match their inner selves. Her enchantments are meant to bring discipline by making them look like what they truly are. She further adds: "Your men weren't bad men;/ Undisciplined life/ Did that to them." In this stanza, Circe describes the kind of life Odysseus' men live and the 'undisciplined' society that allows their 'undisciplined' ways of living. In doing so, Circe further upholds her enchantments as a punishment as well as a warning for those who allow such men to behave in that way. In doing so, Gluck allows Circe the space to attack the patriarchal societies which allow these men to act deceitfully and choose not to punish them.

In the third stanza, Circe proceeds to affirm that her enchantments and the resulting transformations are even meant for these men's own good. They provide the men with the opportunity to perform an inner inversion of the damage that the 'undisciplined' life has impacted on them: "As pigs, / Under the care of/ Me and my ladies, they/ Sweetened right up."

Circe bluntly presents her way of living as the only way for these men's survival. Circe designates herself as a commanding leader to the men who have allowed their subjects to live in an 'undisciplined' way. She further denotes the women, "me and my ladies," as better leaders who are able to 'sweeten up' life for 'undisciplined' men. In the fourth stanza, Circe further elaborates to assert how women do hold the power, she affirms: "Then I reversed the spell, showing you my goodness/ as well as my power." Circe agrees to Odysseus' request to reverse the spell against his men. In removing the spell, Gluck presents another evidence to Circe's power and wittiness that are commonly overlooked in the representation of her character and her relationship with Odysseus in the original Myth. In the original myth, Circe's power is intrinsically overshadowed by her mythical image as a weak vengeful woman who is overwhelmed by Odysseus' charms and acts wickedly to have him.

After the reversal of the spell, Circe assumes a melancholic and reflective tone which marks a major twist in her representation:

We could be happy here,  
As men and women are  
When their needs are simple. In the same breath,

I foresaw your departure,  
Your men with my help braving  
The crying and pounding sea.



The wistfulness Circe displays in this part reflects the female hopes for a life wherein she is no longer defined and/or perceived as the evil and wicked female to be dreaded for refusing to abide by the traditional gender roles assigned to her. She aspires for the kind of happiness that allows her a relationship with the man she loves, Odysseus, without having to relinquish her power. The wistful tone Circe displays in saying, “we could be happy here, / as men and women,” is, therefore, countered the strength she shows in the next stanza.

In contrast to the depiction of men in the mythological narratives as the source of strength, Circe’s ‘help’ is the reason why these men are ‘braving/ The crying and pounding sea’. At the same time, Circe is undisturbed by “a few tears”. Once again, Gluck revises the original myth and presents Circe as a powerful woman who, not only grants men strength, but also displays both bravery and emotional intelligence that are traditionally associated with men in mythical narratives. Circe thus affirms:

You think  
A few tears upset me? My friend,  
A pragmatist at heart; nobody sees essence who can’t  
Face limitation

Unlike Odysseus’ men, Circe is unbothered by and fully aware of the inevitability and reality of ‘tears’ as a significant part of the human existence. It is her awareness of the normal way of the world that allows her to help the men survive the tempestuous waters and head home. In contrast to mythological narratives, Gluck presents Circe as a female character who lacks the egotism and arrogance that men commonly project and suffer from. She is a ‘pragmatist’ who knows, and thus is able to challenge, her ‘limitation(s)’ and therefore “sees essence” and that is her power.

Gluck ends the poem with one final testament to Circe’s power in relation to her love to Odysseus to further reveal another aspect of her character. Circe “wanted” and “could” keep Odysseus and detain him from going back to his wife, Penelope, but she does not want keep him as a ‘prisoner’. She explains: “if I wanted only to hold you / I could hold you prisoner.” However, Circe seeks a reciprocal love relationship, one that is built on mutual trust. If she holds Odysseus against his will, she will forfeit the qualities of the stoic and powerful goddess she is. There is an emphasis on ‘I’ to showcase her power and superiority over men. In having the power to do what she wants and choosing not to, Circe projects an all-powerful, caring and non-selfish image which defies her representation in the mythological narratives as an evil temptress with sexual freedom. Gluck, however, does not deny Circe her feelings of regret and/or vulnerability regarding Odysseus’ leaving and abandoning her for his wife. For these feelings are confronted over the course of the next two Circe’s poems wherein Gluck gives voice to the commonly silenced ‘bad girl’ and or ‘other woman’. In doing so, Gluck further defies the social judgement for mistreating Circe as underserving and vilified because of her love for Odysseus.

In “Circe’s Power,” Gluck, thus, revises the gender roles dominant in Western tradition by presenting Circe as a complex powerful character entertaining a wide range of rationality and emotions. She challenges her prevailing patriarchal representation in the mythical narratives as dominantly evil. In revising Homer’s original myth, Gluck empowers Circe with a powerful voice and presents her as logical, righteous and truthful. In doing so, Gluck evidently goes against the Western tradition which connotes women with deception, probably best personified in the figure of Eve, who persuaded Adam to ‘eat the forbidden fruit,’ leading to the ‘original sin’.

In the same way, in her “Circe’s Grief,” Gluck revises Homer’s original myth to defy the Western inherent gender roles that expect women to sacrifice their power for love. In the mythological narratives, the message is clear: men are brave if they fight their enemies; women are brave if they sacrifice themselves. In this poem, therefore, Gluck emphasises Circe’s power and immortality by mirroring models of male power and redefining them. Circe pronounces herself a ‘god’ rather than a ‘goddess’ to assume the power with which to confront her grief rather than surrender to it - as typically insinuated by the gender roles commonly assigned to women in love. In her attempt to resist her ‘grief’ about losing Odysseus, Circe is not the typically defeated mistress who accepts suffering as her inherent predicament. Circe declares:



In the end, I made myself  
Known to your wife as  
A god would, in her own house, in  
Ithaca, a voice  
Without a body:

In this poem, Gluck emphasises Circe's power and supremacy over Penelope, Odysseus' wife. Circe appears to Odysseus' wife, as "a voice / Without a body." This disembodiment is key element in Gluck's revisionist mythmaking. On one hand, Gluck refuses to sexualize Circe's feminine body in the shape of a 'goddess' so as to defy the traditional way which typically objectifies the female bodies disregarding the role of the mind (and voice). In doing so, Gluck distances Circe from the limitations and expectations of her female identity and asserts her mystical superiority- commonly discredited in female characters. Because Circe is a 'voice,' she is able to surpass space and time and be "in her [Penelope's] own house, in / Ithaca."

On the other hand, and rather than depicting her feelings of 'grief' over her lost love for Odysseus, Gluck presents Circe as capable of actions. She explains Circe's plan to insert herself as a threat of doubt into Penelope's relationship with her husband, Odysseus. This action reveals a deep understanding of the consequences; because in planting herself in Penelope's thoughts, Circe will always remain in Odysseus's life. She explains:

I doubt  
She will return to her loom  
With what she knows now. When  
You see her again, tell her  
This is how a god says goodbye:  
If I am in her head forever  
I am in your life forever

Instead of overwhelming her, Circe's grief over her lost love has urged her to act mindfully and plant herself within the marriage of Penelope and Odysseus. The repetition of 'forever' in the last two lines affirms Circe's immortality and pride. She will never be forgotten nor ignored. There seems to be a deep wisdom in Circe's action which she thus expresses: "If I am in her head / I am in your life forever." Although Circe knows that she has lost Odysseus for his wife, she is still able to create and engage a mental space for herself in his mind as well as his wife's. This is related to the earlier idea of disembodiment and appearing "as / a god would" without having physical presence- she is immortal. In doing so, Gluck revises the gender norms which vilifies Circe for being the 'other woman' and makes her relationship with Odysseus impossible. Once again, Gluck presents Circe as more powerful and more present, one that cannot be overlooked nor denied, in contrast to the societal mistreatments and norms inherent in mythical narratives.

It is noteworthy to emphasize that in depicting Circe's power, Gluck presents it within Circe's own understanding and away from the inherent stereotypes. In assuming the role of the vengeful 'lover' by making Penelope jealous and suffering, Circe does not benefit from the practice of her power because Odysseus still leaves her to Penelope. However, in revising the original myth, Gluck aims to present a real depiction of the archetypal female character to reveal the range, intricacies and uniqueness of the female experience so as to break down the common stereotypes of the 'good girl' / 'bad girl' dichotomy. Thus, emphasizing the multi-layered components of the female character which is fundamentally ignored and/or disregarded in the mythic narratives. Therefore, if Penelope is the wife representing devotion, tranquillity and emotional generosity, Circe is not so much her opposite rather her other side which stands for possessive will, passion and jealousy.

In the last poem in Circe's series, "Circe's Torment," Gluck revises the original myth to elaborate on the depth of emotions and turmoil experienced by the heartbroken 'goddess' that is inherently overlooked in Circe's mythical image as a 'predatory female' devoid of emotions of feelings. In this poem, Circe candidly expresses a wide range of formally unacknowledged emotions as follows:



I regret bitterly  
 The years of loving you in both  
 Your presence and absence, regret  
 The law, the vocation  
 That forbid me to keep you, the sea  
 A sheet of glass, the sun-bleached  
 Beauty of the Greek ships: how  
 Could I have power if  
 I had no wish  
 To transform you:

In the original myth, Odysseus asked Circe to promise him in the name of gods that she would never impact enchantments against him or his soldiers. In this poem, however, Circe expresses her tormenting emotions of regret because of her inability to enact her transformational power on Odysseus. Because of her sincere love as well as “the vocation / That forbid [her] to keep [him],” Circe feels tormented ‘bitterly’ and blames herself for her inability to control her feelings for Odysseus that she even regrets: “The years of loving [him] in both / [his] presence and absence.” Circe further explains the breadth of her grievances in describing her relationship with him as the ‘other woman’: “as / You loved my body. / As you found there,” “Over honour and hope.” Circe, then, affirms that she “had no wish / to transform [him]:” with her powers, so as not to make him her ‘prisoner’. Circe, thus, realizes that she is doomed to lose him in all ways for she is both unable and unwilling to keep Odysseus. Therefore, the feeling of self-torture remains constant in her mind and keeps haunting her. These feelings of anger, loneliness and powerlessness in love leads Circe to constitute a withholding curse upon Odysseus in the final lines of the poem:

... in the name of that bond  
 I refuse you  
 Such feeling for your wife  
 As will let you  
 Rest with  
 her, I refuse you  
 Sleep again  
 If I cannot have you.

In depicting Circe as a woman suffering in love, Gluck condemns the traditional gender norms that inherently disempower women in love. However, rather than presenting the common image of the destroyed women overwhelmed by the pain of separation, Gluck depicts Circe as powerful. Circe’s power is present and brewing within her feelings of ‘torment’ and ‘regret’ and so she is able to curse Odysseus. In doing so, Gluck affirms that Circe refuses to be well-adjusted in mourning her loss. Circe, rather, recognizes her own oppression, stages a resistance and finds possibilities for enacting her powers.

## Conclusion

This research paper aims to examine the revisionist mythmaking strategy employed by Louise Gluck in retelling Homer’s Epic *Odyssey* in her Circe’s poems from her collection of poetry, *Meadowlands* (1996). It seeks to demonstrate how in revising the female character of Circe, the tempting enchantress, Gluck criticizes Homer’s original myth, resists the way female power is vilified and gives voice to women commonly oppressed in the patriarchal Western tradition by their own power.

Revisionist Mythmaking is a strategic use of gendered representations and is a means of examining and endeavouring to “subvert and transform the life and literature women poets inherit” (Ostriker !!). In her article, “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” Alicia Ostriker explores “revisionist mythmaking” arguing that because myth comes prepacked with a wealth of male figures cast as “conquering gods and heroes”, and female ones who are either “sexually wicked” or “virtuously passive”, myth may “seem an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer” (71). However, when the woman writer does turn to myth and uses it for different end goals, it becomes revisionist, and as such it “ultimately mak[es] cultural change possible” (72). “[T]he core of revisionist mythmaking for women poets,” Ostriker asserts, “lies in the



challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth.” This is done, she goes on to argue, through “hit-and-run attacks on [the] familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them” (73). For Ostriker, then, revisionist mythmaking is about modern women poets who take the old stories and transform them in order to express women’s experiences and suffering, historical and present.

Louise Gluck is one of the acclaimed poets who has been captivated by the strategy of revisionist mythmaking as a disruptive force to the inherently silenced women’s voices. She presents an iconic reverse of the traditional gender roles which subjugate women in the position of having always to adhere to the set of patriarchal norms in order to survive. In Homer’s epic *Odyssey*, Circe is depicted as a powerful mythic woman who is known basically for her ability to transform men into pigs, completely altering their bodies while their consciousness remains as is. Odysseus lands on her island, Aeaea, with his soldiers, and Circe invites them to stay on her island for a year. During this year, she falls in love with Odysseus and allows them to live in abundance before they resume their journey back home to Ithaca. Circe is typically represented as the archetypal female enchantress who preys on undeserving men for no reason other than having the power to do so. She is demonic for entertaining her magical potentials and sexual freedom.

In revising Circe’s character in her three poems in her collection of poetry *Meadowlands* (1997), Gluck examines and revises the inherent representation of Circe as perpetuated by the narratives of Greek mythology. In revising the original myth, Gluck identifies the trap and the societal barriers set by the traditional gender norms for strong women with exceptional powers like Circe. She presents a true and individual female experience that defies the inherent female imagery established in the mythical narratives. Gluck depicts Circe as a female character who is capable of altering the patriarchal norms inherent in the mythical imagery where strong women are feared and vilified for their strength.

Gluck employs the three Circe’s poems to grant Circe the platform and the voice to express her consciousness of her own strength of character, to acknowledge her oppression within her own strength and to break the bounds of her traditional gender roles so as to evolve unapologetically as who she is. Circe is, therefore, presented as a female individual with multi-layered and complex existence and not simply a stereotype. She is granted the opportunity to break down the barriers by making choices based on individual characteristics, which are far from the inherent dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, so as to find her own happiness and freedom through practicing power, grief and torment.

In employing revisionist mythmaking, Gluck creates a narrative that allows for Circe to come forward, have a voice through which to resist patriarchal oppression, and to embrace her power, rather than accept the essentialized and reduced representation found in the mythical narratives. By allowing Circe a voice, Gluck provides her the opportunity to be heard alongside Homer and thus adds to the on-going urge for nuanced representation of women which acknowledges the changing realities of the contemporary world in opposition to the mythological narratives.



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