

The witch or bewitched?

Interpreting the representations of Voice and Space in Atwood's *Circe/mud poems*

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Abstract: The paper is an enquiry into the representation of 'voice' and 'space' as major aspects of agency determining the role and relevance of a female in a patriarchal structure. Atwood's *Circe/Mud Poems* as a response to Homer's *Odyssey* recasts Circe obverse to her conventional representation as a demonic temptress, evil with malintent. Elaborating on the subverted image of Circe, the paper proceeds to interpret the impact of Atwood's revision in two phases (i) Seizing speech through accessing narrative authority, yet imbued with passivity (ii) Securing space as a constructive conclusion in an imaginary island in consequence to the encroachment of her island and entrapment of her body.

Key Words: Atwood, myth, revision, patriarchy, voice, space, body

Like most feminist revisionist writers, myth to Atwood was the means of interrogating the problematic and power-driven gender structure. Her vision resonates with Liz York's interpretation of revisionist myth making as a "difficult process of remaking," which "involve the questioning and undoing of patriarchal propositions codes, and positions." Atwood's use of mythological intertexts goes much further than a simple subversion and involves a deconstruction of mythical figures reshaped with varied purposes. To forge an attack on the cultural hegemony, she relies profoundly on prevailing myths transforming them to suit the current contexts resonating with Barthes' view, "myth hides nothing; its function is to distort, not to make disappear."

Atwood's *Circe* is (re)modelled on the seductive sorceress appearing as a marginal character in an interlude in Homer's *Odyssey*. Discharged from the stock scenarios of the source text, Atwood's *Circe* invalidates her infamy as the evil enchantress seducing Ulysses (along with his crew) letting the course unfurl from her point of view, constructing and weaving her own version of events.

Acclaiming the fluidity of female experience when freed from male fantasies, she avails herself of the space that Atwood allots her, owning it to cherish her imperfections with her newfound voice. Envisioned vulnerable, volatile and victimized, this version of *Circe* exhibits possibility of evaluating her efforts to "renounce the patriarchal misogyny which equates females with either angelic passivity or evil duplicity" (Massoura 61).

In considering this counterstatement reviewing the representations of voice and space proves to penetrate into the underlying ambiguity of *Circe*. Olivia A leclair cites from *Margaret Atwood Vision and forms* to speak of this ambivalence of reappraised characters: "Of special significance to Atwood is the suggested ambiguity in the Homeric model of female figure who are simultaneously subordinated to male ones, yet powerful" (LeClair 52). This vacillation typically true to *Circe*, is studied in two phases.

Seizing speech for the "tongueless and broken"

As the unnamed narrator in Atwood's *Surfacing* swears: "It was language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine, what surfaces is the complexity of language as a product of patriarchal culture and its inadequacy in professing the feelings of female characters. Atwood pitches her poetry as a potential tool, to not promote the oppressor's cause, but withstand it and combat for the repressed. She, therefore, in her series of poems features *Circe* with the supremacy of a storyteller, robbing the language (from the misogynistic clutches) and reciting the tale downgrading Ulysses, the "homodiegetic narrator" (Leporini 39) in the Homeric saga. Leporini's theory rescripted mean to communicate the unreliability of the original narration (owing to Ulysses' disposition as a "genius of cunning and deceit"), and thereby, necessitate an edited account from a female

perspective zeroed on the omissions “to reach the truth [...] by a secondary character” (39)

The reversal of role from that of an object (of “secondary” status) to an autonomous order helps Circe to leverage her side of the story. Circe “seems to be speaking with two voices, one of the mythical prophethess, and another one of the contemporary woman with a female consciousness” (Massoura 62). Wielding control over the narrative, she is supplied with the chance to clear her hand in the alleged transformation of men into something that the Circe is accused of in popular culture:

It was not my fault, these animals
who once were lovers
it was not my fault the snouts
and hooves, the tongues
thickening and rough, the mouths grown over
with teeth and fur
did not add the shaggy
rugs, the tusked masks,
They happened (Atwood 48)

Asserting her innocence, she reinforces, “they [just] happened” (48), defying the construction of her as a mistress of enchantments. Atwood also brings in the question of tussle between fault and power into the context by hinting at Circe’s guilt (that she recurrently evades) of having “observed the transformation (which she had probably triggered) without intervening almost with cynical gratification” (Leporini 40). “I did not say anything, I sat/ and watched they happened/ because I did not say anything.// It was not my fault [...] (Atwood 48).

Denying involvement in the arrival and the subsequent metamorphosis of the sailors, she is portrayed as passively watching the story unfold, as she knows it will and because she does nothing, it happens. This brings the focus back to her static state, struck on the island. Left without an alternative, she is forced to comply with the conventional narrative and let it transpire without tensions.

Another instance of Circe enjoying the agency of voice/ language is in unmasking the flaws of Ulysses. Originally idolized as a valiant warrior, righteous and adventurous, Circe “dethrones him from his mythic height,” monitors Nita Ramiyya (Zuhair 135) exposing an altogether variant facet of the indefatigable hero. His colossal eminence gets minimized to nothingness as Circe relates: “Those who say they want nothing want everything./ It was

not his greed/ That offended me, it was lies” (Atwood 50).

Taking as he pleased, believing it to be his privilege, Ulysses’ “mind,” regrets Circe, “is like [his] hands vacant” (50) This emptiness (moral and spiritual) enmeshed in a crippling dullness of his routine life adds to his unpalatable character, which Circe questions:

Don’t you get tired of killing
those whose deaths have been predicted
And are therefore dead already
Don’t you get tired of wanting
to live forever?
Don’t you get tired of saying Onward? (51)

This objectionable side of Ulysses that Circe criticizes matches with her general contentions of men as “common as flies” who “swoop and thunder around this island,/ [...] bumping into each other” (47).

The first half of the eighth unit is devoted to describing Ulysses copiously.

You stand at the door
bright as an icon
dressed in your thorax,
the forms of the indented
ribs and soft belly underneath
carved into the slick bronze
so that it fits you almost
like a real skin
You are impervious
With hope it hardens you,
This joy, this expectation, gleam
in your hand like axes. (53)

Even affirmative emotional responses such as hope (impenetrable like his armor) and joy (analogous to arms) have derogatory denotations with Ulysses that Circe declares, revealing her anxiety, “to be feared to be despised, these are your choices” (53).

Despite these doubts and instances of evident aversions, she displays an ambivalent affinity for him that sways between love and indifference.

Your body that includes everything
you have love, you have had done
to your and goes beyond it
This is not what I want
But I want this also (60)

Circe’s ambiguous attitude towards Ulysses overlooking his manipulative and unscrupulous interference adds to her character an undesirable layer of passivity and ineluctable subservience. In revising

the myth Atwood disapproves of attributing unrealistic aura to Circe; alternately, she pays demurred attention to the stereotypical gender-role of women “to become the receptacle, sexual object, modelled in the image and likeness of men’s desires” (Leporini 43)

Contradictory to these vexed desires of Circe is considered the Mud section of the poetic series. It foreshadows the dissolution of Circe’s power narrated in the co-existent myth of the Mud woman. Interwoven into the fabric of Circe story and considered by most critics as Circe’s alter ego, the Mud woman is an intradiegetic narrative. Crafted (presumably by young Ulysses and his friend) to fulfil the prescribed gender-roles, she epitomizes the muted suppression of women, a figurine for (specifically and exclusively) for men to “make love to her, sinking with ecstasy into her soft moist belly, her brown wormy flesh where small weeds had already rooted” (Atwood 61).

Unlike Circe, who continually disputes her role in the myth, the Mud-woman is a defunct earthy effigy without voice and intelligence. While moulding her out of mud, the boys “stuck to the essentials” (61) expected of a female body “that began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows” (61) The malleable mesh of mud that “he spilled his entire life” into is juxtaposed with Circe’s (newly) adopted voice that refutes being “modelled to the likeness of men’s desires” (61).

Quoting Veronica Leigh House, “her heedlessness is crucial, she can’t talk back” (LeClair 51), representing Circe’s own limitations within the myth that she cannot recount her own story. Through a retelling of her side to the story, Circe aims to readjust the attention of the readers to see beyond her prejudiced picturization. In frustration and pain, Circe, in charge of her own voice inquires: “Is this what you would/ Like me to be, this Mud women (Atwood 61)?

An indisputable voice of protest rings in her wailing; yet, Atwood’s Circe wins freedom from the cyclical portrayal as a witch to shed light on her actuality as a victim, bewitched by Ulysses. Echoing Alice Ostriker, “we must also have it in our power to seize speech and make it say what we mean” (Lake 32,) Atwood steals back the language for Circe to reinterpret the classical narrative.

Securing space “where all [Her] desires are fulfilled”

Asserting a place to settle with sovereignty combating the invasive male gaze is challenging for women, especially when such conquests focus not just on the physical landscapes but also concern a total annexation of her physiological frontiers as well. The poem towards the end opens with Circe’s statement, “I am the place, where all desires are fulfilled” (Atwood 67) Identifying herself with the (is)landscape. Her inability to escape the vicious cycle of myth weakens her existence on the island that Ulysses manipulates unregretfully.

Circe’s body becomes the space where he can write his heroic script. The sexual relation between Circe and Ulysses sets the tone of the chain of events that becomes decisive in determining Circe’s ambivalence. Despite Circe’s longing for a fulfilling relationship with Ulysses beyond the pleasures of the body, the sexual acts between them, narrow down to mere demonstration of his authority that she moans despondently, “Let go, this is extortion” (51). Violence permeates such episodes: “Holding [her] arms down holding [her] head down by the hair/ Mouth gouging [her] face and neck, fingers groping into [her] flesh” (55).

Ulysses treats her body as a site not for shared pleasure, but to exert his supremacy, reducing her to a mirror, fit to reflect his ego. As Circe lashes out at him, “look at me and see your reflection” (56), Atwood enunciates, in guise of her poetic persona, her impression of mirrors as masculine weapons. They are reflecting surfaces that primarily imprison (the self and spirit of female) and then present her the flawed image of her own body. What she sees in her own reflection is the twisted truth that Ulysses wants her to see.

Facing her distorted self, her anger seethes out: “Why do you need this.?! Why do you want me to admit” (55)? Physical violation of her bodily territory is proximate to Circe’s loss of voice turning her “tongue less” and “broken” (55). Ulysses “Unbuckle[s] the fingers of the fist” (57), looting her source of power and incapacitating her. The fist “withered and hung on chain around her neck,” “stutters” but “gives up” (57) eventually. Circe’s disembodiment signals her reduction to the status of a subaltern, colonized and, abused. She opens (upon Ulysses initiation), enfeebled:

[...] like a hand
Cut of at the wrist

(It is the
 Arm feels pain
 But the severed hand
 The hand clutches at freedom) (58)

by the wind from coast
 to coast to coast, boot on the boat prow
 to hold the wooden body
 under, soul in control (Atwood 51)

Circe's longing for freedom from Ulysses as well as from the mythical cycle concurs with the fate of the Mud woman confined in her dismembered body. Her body no longer belongs to her, and stays forever in the perverted clutches of men, who "would repair her," after taking turns to abuse her, "making her hip more spacious, enlarging her breasts with their shining stone nipples" (61).

His manipulative mentality is deplored by Circe as she recalls how "one day [he] simply appeared in a stupid boat," "pretending to be [...] a survivor" (50). Appealing to her sympathies, he began exploiting her accommodating nature, overrunning the island and its resources. She recalls saying:

Circe refuses to yield like the Mud woman, and Ulysses, mapping the frontiers of her body like a cartographer exploring and seizing it, finally gets to confront her infuriated reaction:

I don't have to take
 Anything you throw into me
 I close myself over, leaf as an eye
 Deaf as wound which listens
 To nothing but its own pain:
 Get out of here
 Get out of here (63)

This is mine this island, you can have
 the rocks, the plants
 that spread themselves flat over
 the thin soil, I renounce them,
 You can have this water,
 this flesh, I abdicate,
 I watch you, you claim
 without noticing it,
 you know how to take. (54)

Reclaiming her body, she secures the space once again, unwilling to "do nothing about it but accept" (63). The feminist undertones in the poem connecting the female body to space, a "desert island" (49) that is enslaved and a "place where all desires are fulfilled" (67), may be read in relation to Atwood's short story *Alien territory*, where she shuns men deprived of "any body at all," but only "heads, the smiling heads, the talking heads, the decision-making heads" (Massoura, 71). In comparison, Circe derives her strength out of her body (forbidding her perpetrator to continue invading her body) to battle out the injustices. The resistance becomes unique to her version of the story as she manages to iron out the differences in the narrative in an illusory (but outside the mythical margins) space.

The overwhelming welcome of Ulysses forecasts the inevitable, employing his skill to usurp and annex her island which is an extended metaphor for her own body and self. She decides to "renounce" and "abdicate" her assets entitling him to everything. Although recognizing this self-destructive strain, Circe wishes to liberate herself, but fails being bound within the conventionalities of myth.

The infiltration of physical space, Circe's Island, by Ulysses also offers an opening to discuss the metaphors of territorial appropriation. Ulysses is indicative of man's inherent colonial tendencies prompting him to maraud and plunder foreign lands. Circe wonders about his urge for new adventures gaining control over new spaces and being:

There must be more for you to do
 than permit yourself to be shoved

Yet Circe's resistance stays relevant and persuasive in her envisioning a space of her own, a distant island, "the second "island that accommodates both her and her narrative. Italicized to mean a prophecy, the poem/dream segment considers the space with promising possibilities of transgressing the stagnant mythical boundaries (of the first island) ensuring change, evolution and growth.

The barrenness of the desert island, "the dry shore" with its "burned and sparse" (46) topography is replaced with richness and fertility predicting a life of passion than passivity.

We walk through a field it is November,
 The grass is yellow, tinged
 With grey, the apples
 Are still on the trees
 They are orange, astonishing,
 [...]
 We see birds, [...] and
 A stream, not frozen yet, in the mud
 beside it the track of a deer (69)

Fantasmizing a utopian space dismissed of its routine male specificities, the poem climaxes with a dual ending “towards an intertext that determine events and gender relation in the present text, and towards a desired ideal text that would permit redefinition of situations and gender relations” (Lake 31). The dream of a paradisaic island is by itself a privilege impelling uninhibited exploration of possibilities in the idyllic land.

The last poem spotlights Circe’s personal utterance with distinct focus on herself (“I”) a voice that she finally reclaims. Circe, thus, retrieves her voice (language) through repossessing her space (island/body) widening its peripheral limits to an unreal (“not finished”) island that contains her essence and existence within and outside of the myth.

Atwood’s retelling bespeaks what is lost in women’s existence/ experience when mediated by men and exposes the violence within these texts through a powerful critique of its biased narrative structure. She, through the series of *Circe/Mud poems* incites a broader prospect of staging a resistance by women to redefine (oppressive) situations and gender relations by seizing voice and securing space in the real world.

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