

Circe

Admit me, CHORUS to this History,
who, Prologue-like ...

-1-

Pardon, Gentles all,
The flat unleaven'd Spirit that hath dar'd,
On this unworthy Scaffold, to bring forth
So great an Object. Can this Cock-Pit hold
The sounding Furrowes of the wine-dark Sea?
Or may we cramme
Within this Wooden O the swift blacke shippes
That burnt the toplesse Towres of Ilium?

(WS + PB, CM, JM, AT)

-1,000,000-

O, pardon! since a crooked Figure may
Attest in little space a Million,
And let us, Cyphers to this great Accompt,
On your imaginarie Forces worke.

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.

For 'tis your thoughts that now must boldly cut
Through liquid Mountains in a strong-ribb'd Barke
And bring the much-enduring Man to Circe's
Bowered Isle and tufted Grove.

Circe

Prelude

*Who knows not Circe
The daughter of the Sun? Whose charmèd Cup
Whoever tasted, lost his upright shape,
And downward fell into a groveling Swine.*

(Milton, *Comus*)

Act 1

Circe's Cup

**We came to the island
of Aiaia. Circe lived there,
dread goddess with beautiful hair,
who speaks with mortals.**

We brought our ship quietly to shore
guided to harbour by some god.
We disembarked and lay there
two days and nights, sad and weary.

But at dawn on the third day
I took spear and sword, and made
for a high point, to look for humans
or listen for some sound of them.

I stood on a high rock and saw
smoke rising from Circe's halls
through the dense woods and scrub.

Should I take a closer look?
I thought it best to go back
to the ship, feed my comrades
then send them ahead to explore.

I went back to the ship
and roused my companions,
speaking gently to each man in turn.

My friends, we are not yet going
down to the house of Death.

Come, while we have food and drink
let's eat, and not starve to death.

So for the whole day until sunset
we feasted on meat and sweet wine
but when the sun set and night came
we lay down to sleep by the shore.

At dawn I summoned them and spoke:
Friends, we do not know where we are;
let us think what plan we should follow;
I know of nothing we can do.

I climbed to a high point and saw
that we are on an island
surrounded by sea. The land is low,
and I saw smoke through the trees.

I divided my companions
into two groups. I led one,
brave Eurylochos the other.

Then we shook lots in a helmet,
and Eurylochos' came out first.
He set off with twenty-two men,
weeping; and we were weeping too.

In a clearing they found
Circe's house,
made of polished stone.

Round it were wolves and lions
bewitched by Circe with her drugs;
they did not attack the men
but fawned on them, waving their tails.

Like dogs hoping for titbits
when their master comes from a feast,
these beasts fawned on my comrades;
but the men were frightened by them.

They stood in Circe's forecourt
and heard her singing sweetly
as she wove on a splendid loom,
her work divinely beautiful.

Now Polites, leader of men,
the dearest of friends,
spoke to my companions:

Friends, someone is singing in there
while she moves about at her loom.
The whole place resounds to her voice:
woman or goddess – let's call her.

The men called out, Circe appeared,
invited them in, and they entered.
Only Eurylochos hung back
for he feared this was a trap.

She gave them seats inside and mixed
a potion – barley, cheese, and honey
in wine; but added evil drugs
to make them forget their homeland.

When they had drunk, she struck them
with her wand, and drove them out
to the pigsties; and they became pigs,
with pigs' bristles, but with men's minds.

They wept as they were penned in the sty
and Circe spread acorns for them
and other things that pigs feed on.

Entracte

Act 2

Hermes' Antidote

Eurylochos came back to the ship
to tell of our friends' fate.

At first he could not speak at all
for grief, his eyes brimming with tears
but we questioned him
and at last he told us it all.

We went, noble Odysseus,
through the woods as you told us,
and found a house in a clearing.

Someone – woman or goddess –
was singing inside at a loom.
The men called out to her.

She opened the doors and appeared,
invited them in, and they entered.
I alone waited outside
for I feared this was a trap.

Then they all disappeared;
I did not see them again
though I kept watch for a long time.

I slung my sword on my shoulder,
and my bow, and told him
to take me back by the same path.
He clasped my knees and begged me:

Odysseus, do not force me!
Leave me here! I know you will not
return, nor any of your companions.
Let us flee and avoid the evil day.

Eurylochos,
you can stay here, eating and drinking.
I shall go, for go I must.

So I left the ship and the shore
and went through the woods
and drew near the house of Circe,
she who is expert in potions.

That was where I met Hermes,
in the form of a graceful youth,
carrying his golden wand.
He took my hand and spoke to me:

Where are you going, alone
not knowing the way? To save
your friends penned in the pigsties?
You will end up there with them!

I'll protect you. Here, take this plant
and go into Circe's house.
This will keep you safe in danger.

I will tell you of Circe's wiles.
She will give you a poisoned drink
but this herb will protect you.
Let me tell you what you must do.

When Circe strikes you with her wand
draw your sword and rush at her
as though you meant to kill her.

She'll be afraid; and will ask you
to share her bed. Don't refuse her,
for then she will free your comrades
and also take care of you.

But make her swear the binding oaths
of the gods, to do you no harm,
so she will not unman you
once you are naked beside her.

So Hermes pulled up the plant
and gave me it. The roots were black,
the flowers white. Gods call it 'moly';
they can uproot it, men cannot.

Hermes flew away,
towards high Olympus; and I
went on my way to Circe's house,
battered by a storm of thoughts.

I stood at the goddess's door
and called, and the goddess heard me.

She opened the door and asked me
to go in; I entered, my heart
troubled. She gave me a fine chair
beautifully made, and a footstool.

She brought a drink in a gold cup,
adding a baneful drug.
I drank it – it did me no harm.
Then she struck me with her wand.

Off to your friends in the pigsties!

I drew my sword, rushing at Circe
as though I meant to kill her.
She screamed and clasped my knees:

Who are you? And from where?
I marvel that you drank my drugs
unhurt; no other man could do it.
Your mind is proof against magic.

You must be wily Odysseus.
Hermes often said you would come
in your black ship, sailing from Troy.

Come, put up your sword in its sheath,
and let us go to my bed.
There, united in love,
we shall come to trust each other.

Circe, how can I love you?
You turned my comrades into pigs.
Now in bed you'll unman me
as I lie naked beside you.

I shall not go to your bed
till you swear a great oath, goddess,
that you mean me no further harm.

She swore the oath as I asked her
and when she had sworn, I went
to Circe's beautiful bed.

Meanwhile her four maids were busy:
one rubbed me with oil, dressed me
in a handsome cloak and tunic,
then led me to a fine chair
and invited me to eat.

But I was thinking dark thoughts.
When Circe noticed how I sat
without eating, and sorrowful,
she stood beside me and spoke:

Odysseus, why do you sit there
mute, not eating or drinking?
Are you still suspicious of me?
But I am bound by a great oath.

Circe, how could any man bear
to eat and drink until he saw
his comrades released? If you want
to see me eat, set them free!

Circe went out through the palace
with her wand and opened the sties.
Out came my men – full-grown pigs.
She smeared them with ointment.

The bristles disappeared.
They were men again, but younger,
more handsome, taller
than they had been before.

They knew me, and clung to my hands,
weeping tears of relief.
The goddess herself felt pity
and she came close to me and spoke:

Son of Laertes, sprung from Zeus,
Odysseus, go to your ship,
pull it up on shore, stow your goods,
and come back with all your men.

She spoke and my proud heart agreed.
I went to my ship and the shore.
By the ship I found my comrades,
all of them mourning and weeping.

And as calves greet their mothers
when the cows come back from pasture,
running to meet them and lowing,
so they crowded round me in tears.

They felt as if they were back
at home in rugged Ithaca
where they were born and reared,
and as they wept they spoke to me:

Great Odysseus,
we are as glad of your return
as if we had reached Ithaca and home.
But tell us our comrades' fate.

First, let us drag the ship on land
and stow our gear in the caves.
Then come quickly to Circe's house
where your comrades are feasting.

They quickly did as I told them
but Eurylochos tried to restrain them.

Wretched men, where are we going?
You want to go to Circe's house?
She will turn us all into beasts
and make us guard her palace.

Remember what the Cyclops did:
our comrades went into his cave
and bold Odysseus was with them;
they died through his rash folly.

He spoke, and I was tempted
to cut off his head with my sword,
close kinsman though he was;
but my companions calmed me down.

Lord, if you wish, we'll let this man
stay by the ship and guard it;
but you can lead the rest of us
to the sacred house of Circe.

So they left the ship and the sea.
Eurylochos did not stay behind,
but followed, fearing my anger.

In Circe's house we found our friends
together, enjoying a feast.
When the two groups met, they wept
till the house rang; but Circe said:

Odysseus, son of Laertes,
stop this lamentation. I too
know all you have suffered at sea
and from hostile men on land.

But now come, eat and drink
till you regain the courage you had
when you first left your native land,
the rugged isle of Ithaka.

Now you are exhausted, discouraged,
thinking of your long, hard travels;
you can feel no joy now.

She spoke, and our proud hearts agreed.

A whole year passed.

Day in, day out,
we feasted on meat and sweet wine.

From Aiaia, Odysseus sailed
to the Ocean shore of Cimmeria,
to summon Tiresias from Hades
and to learn his fate.

But he returned to Aiaia
to bury his shipmate, Elpenor.

Entracte

Act 3

The Sirens' Song

When our ship had left the Ocean
and crossed the open sea,
and come to Aiaia again,
where Dawn lives, and the sun rises,
we beached and went ashore.

Circe knew we had returned.
She came, bringing bread
and plentiful meat and red wine.
The bright goddess spoke to us:

Rash men, who went alive to Hades,
facing death twice, while other men
must die only once! Come now,
eat and drink, stay here today.

At dawn tomorrow you sail.
I shall show the way and tell you
what to do to avoid harm
either at sea or on land.

So we feasted on meat and wine
till night came, and the men lay down
to sleep by the stern of the ship.

But Circe took me by the hand
and led me away from the rest
and asked me about our voyage
and I told her all that happened.

So, that is done. Now listen:
from here you'll come to the Sirens
who bewitch all who draw near.

Any man who listens to them
will never return home,
never be joyfully surrounded
by wife and children.

The Sirens cast their spell in song.
The beach near their meadow
is full of bones
covered in shrivelled skin.

You must row straight past: plug
your companions' ears with wax
so that they cannot listen.

If you yourself want to hear,
your men must tie you to the mast.
Then you can enjoy the Sirens' song.

When you beg them to free you,
they must only tie you tighter.
After that I can reveal no more;
you yourself must choose your course.

She spoke, and Dawn appeared.
Circe left, and I went on board.
I told my men to cast off
and they sat to their oars and rowed,
striking the grey sea with their oars.

To help us, a following wind
was sent by fair-haired Circe,
dread goddess
who speaks with mortals.

So making all fast on the ship
we sat down and let the wind
and the helmsman keep her steady.
With heavy heart I spoke to the men.

Friends, I should pass on the warnings
the bright goddess Circe gave me:

if we know them, we may either die,
or escape death and fate.

First, we must beware the Sirens
singing in their flowery meadow.
But she said that I was to listen.

So you must tie me to the mast
with tight ropes, and when I beg
to be freed, make them tighter.

Even while I was speaking,
the ship, running before the wind,
was nearing the Sirens' island.

The wind dropped, the sea grew calm,
and my comrades lowered the sails,
then sat to their oars and rowed.

I took a big cake of wax,
cut a piece off and softened it
with my hands and the sun's warmth,
and plugged my companions' ears.

Then they bound me,
tying me tightly to the mast,
and took their places again,
dipping their oars in the grey sea.

But when we came within earshot
the Sirens caught sight of our ship
and raised their clear-toned song.

Come here to us, great Odysseus,
heave to and hear our singing.

For no man passes this island
without hearing our sweet song.
Then, rejoicing and a wiser man,
he sails on.

For we know all that the Greeks
and the Trojans endured in Troy
by the gods' will; and we know
all that happens in all the world.

For we know all that the Greeks
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by the gods' will; and we know
all that happens in all the world.

So they raised their voices,
and I longed to hear more.
I signalled to my men to free me
but they went on rowing strongly.

Perimides and Eurylochos
stood up and bound me more tightly.

But when we had passed the Sirens
and lost the sound of their singing
they took the wax plugs from their ears
and untied the ropes that bound me.

TEΛΟΣ

*I have oft heard
My mother Circe with the Sirens three,
Amidst the flowry-kirtl'd Naiades,
Who as they sang would take the prison'd soul,
And lap it in Elysium.*

(Milton, *Comus*)

*Blest pair of Sirens, pledges of Heav'ns joy,
Spear-born harmonious Sisters, Voice, and Verse.*

(Milton, *At a Solemn Musick*)

Meanwhile her four maids were busy:
one laid rich coverlets
on the backs and seats of the chairs;

another prepared tables
and placed the golden dishes;
a third mixed wine
and set out goblets of gold;

the fourth lit a blazing fire
and brought water to heat
in a great cauldron.

When the water boiled, she bathed me,
mixing hot and cold water

and pouring it over my head,
refreshing my weary limbs.

Epilogue

Circe's Lament

Remedia Amoris

Circe, what use were magic herbs
when a fair wind took the Ithacan ships?
Everything you tried, to keep your wily guest,
but he hoisted sail, determined on flight.

Everything you tried, to escape the fire,
but love stayed long in your reluctant heart.
Men you could change into a thousand shapes
but not your own soul's laws.

They say that when he wanted to depart
you detained him with these words:

No longer do I ask, as once I hoped,
that you should marry me;
and yet I thought myself a worthy wife,
a goddess and daughter of the sun.

But do not leave so soon; I ask you to wait:
Could I wish for anything less?
You see the waves: you ought to fear them;
later the wind will be kinder to your sails.

Why do you flee? No new Troy rises here
and no-one calls 'To arms!' again.
Here there is love, and peace, where only I am hurt;
and all this land will lie safe.

Even as she spoke, Odysseus was casting off:
Words and sails were gone with the wind.