

## INKLINGS-SYMPOSIUM 2023

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### **"I thought once that gods are the opposite of death, but I see now they are more dead than anything": Divine Immortality as a Curse in Madeline Miller's *Circe***

Fantastic literature has always been faced with the accusation of escapism, despite the considerable subversive potential of work within this genre. There is a significant overlap of fantastic fiction and (religious) myths, especially as far as their explanatory function of wonders and mysteries is concerned. Particularly in fantastic fiction set in secondary worlds, mythology still fulfils this function. In recent years, authors like Neil Gaiman or Madeline Miller have adapted Norse and ancient Greek mythology and use those fantastic stories as narrative backdrops for works such as *American Gods*, *Norse Mythology*, *The Song of Achilles* or *Circe*. These novels have taken centuries-old mythologies and turned them into appealing narratives for contemporary readers. This paper will show how the overlap of religious myth and fantastic fiction is not restricted to secondary worlds but can also find its place within primary world fantasy. Moreover, it will discuss how immortality is not necessarily an admirable state but can be perceived as a curse.

In order to further develop these two theses, the paper will provide a close reading of Madeline Miller's 2018 novel *Circe*, which tells the story of sorceress and nymph Circe and her relationship with several characters of Greek mythology. Circe is widely known through the *Odyssey*, where she keeps Odysseus on her island and turns his men into animals; Miller's novel and the chosen focalisation allow for an alternative interpretation of this crucial scene in the *Odyssey*, one in which Circe is not a cruel witch keeping back the hero, but an outcast who wants to protect both herself and the island paradise she has created for herself. Through this female perspective, *Circe* enables the reader to appreciate and understand the multifaceted nature of divine power, magical objects, and the journey to and from the underworld.

Published during the height of the Me Too movement, feminine empowerment is at the heart of Miller's second novel. By providing a rich narrative background to the exile on Aiaia, Miller's *Circe* is offered a say in her own story and ultimately gets to decide for herself whether she wants to remain immortal. While Miller's novel continually foregrounds questions of knowledge, beauty, and above all power, Circe is the only character struggling with immortality and especially with the indifference towards both pain and joy that immortality grants the gods and goddesses. In the end, Circe does not perceive immortality as a curse in general but advocates for freedom of choice and finding one's own place in history. This ability to position herself within a framework of her own making, regardless of assigned or perceived roles, is what makes Miller's approach a decidedly feminist reading of the myth of Circe.

**Raphaela Behounek** is a PhD student at the University of Salzburg, currently researching in the field of young adult fiction and especially fantastic fiction for young adults. After completing a B.A. in English and American Studies, she went on to earn her M. in Literature from the University of Essex. Her main research interests include the fictionalisation of institutions and power relations, as well as literature in popular culture. One of her key concerns within her research is to raise awareness for the applicability of literary research beyond academia.

