

Circe, the Enchantress (#3)

Book 10

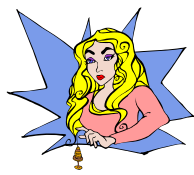
With the Cyclops' threats echoing in their ears, Odysseus and his men flee to their ships and set sail. For a month, they stay with **Aeolus**, the wind king. Finally, Aeolus sends Odysseus off, with the west wind blowing the ships toward Ithaca and a great bag holding all the unfavorable, stormy winds. In sight of home, while Odysseus sleeps, the men open the bag, thinking it contains gold and silver. The bad winds escape and blow the ship back to King Aeolus. The king refuses to help them again, believing now that their voyage has been cursed by the gods.



The discouraged voyagers next stop in the **land of the cannibals** known as the **Laistrygones**, who bombard their ships with boulders. Only Odysseus, his ship and its crew of forty-five survive the shower of boulders. The lone ship then sails to **Aeaea**, home of the goddess Circe. There, Odysseus divides his men into two groups. Eurylochus leads one platoon and Odysseus the other. Eurylochus' group sets out to explore the island.

“In the wild wood they found an open glade, around a smooth stone house-the hall of Circe- and wolves and mountain lions lay there, mild in her soft spell, fed on her drug of evil. None would attack-oh, it was strange, I tell you-but switching their long tails they faced our men like hounds, who look up when their master comes with tidbits for them-as he will-from table. Humbly those wolves and lions with mighty paws fawned on our men-who met their yellow eyes and feared them.

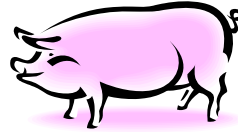
In the entrance way they stayed to listen there: inside her quiet house they heard the goddess Circe. Low she sang In her beguiling voice, while on her loom she wore ambrosial fabric sheer and bright, by that craft known to the goddesses of heaven. No one would speak, until Polites- most Faithful and likable of my officers, said:



‘Dear friends, no need for stealth; here’s a young weaver singing a pretty song to set the air

a tingle on these lawns and paven courts. Goddess she is or lady. Shall we greet her?’

So reassured, they all cried out together, and she came swiftly to the shining doors to call them in. All but Eurylochus- who feared a snare- the innocents went after her. On thrones she seated them, and lounging chairs, while she prepared a meal of cheese and barley and amber honey mixed with Pramnian wine, adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose desire of thought of our dear fatherland.

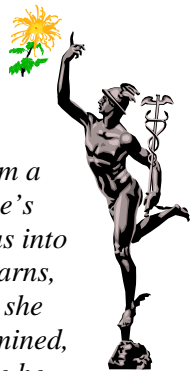


Since they had drunk when she flew after them with her long stick and shut them in a pigsty- bodies, voices, heads, and bristles,

all swinish now, though minds were still unchanged. So, squealing, in they went. And Circe tossed them acorns, mast and cornel berries- fodder for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth.

Down to the ship Eurylochus came running to cry alarm, foul magic doomed his men! But working with dry lips to speak a word he could not, being so shaken; blinding tears welled in his eyes; foreboding filled his heart. When we were frantic questioning him, at last we heard the tale; our friends were gone...

Eurylochus tells Odysseus what has happened and begs the captain to sail away from Circe's land. Against Eurylochus' advice, Odysseus rushes to save his men from the enchantress. On the way, he meets the god **Hermes**, who gives him a special flower- a **molu**- to protect him from Circe's power. Now she will not be able to turn Odysseus into a pig as she has with the others. Still, Hermes warns, Odysseus must make the enchantress swear that she will play no “witches' tricks.” Even more determined, Odysseus continues toward Circe's palace. Once he arrives, Circe welcomes him and leads him to a magnificent silver-studded chair.



The lady Circe



mixed me a golden cup of honeyed wine adding in mischief her unholy drug. I drank and the drink failed. But she came forward aiming a stroke with her long stick, and whispered:

‘Down in the sty and snore among the rest!’

Without a word, I drew my sharpened sword
and in one bound held it against her throat.
She cried out, then slid under to take my knees,
catching her breath to say, in her distress:

‘What champion, of what country, can you be? Where
are your kinsmen and your city?
Are you not sluggish with my wine? Ah, wonder!
Never a mortal man that drank this cup
out when it passed his lips he had succumbed.
Hale must your heart be and your tempered will.
Odysseus then you are, O great contender,
of whom the glittering god with golden wand
spoke to me ever, and foretold
the black swift ship would carry you from Troy. Put
up your weapon in the sheath. We two
shall mingle and make love upon our bed.
So mutual trust may come of play and love.’
To this I said:

‘Circe, am I a boy,
that you should make me soft and doting now? Here
in this house you turned my men to swine; now it is I
myself you hold, enticing
into your chamber, to your dangerous bed,
to take my manhood when you have me stripped.
I mount no bed of love with you upon it.
Or swear me first a great oath, if I do,
you’ll work no more enchantment to my harm.’

She swore at once, outright, as I demanded,
and after she had sworn, and bound herself,
I entered Circe’s flawless bed of love....



*Circe’s maidens bathe Odysseus and
offer him a tempting meal, yet his mind
remains on his captive men.*



Circe regarded me, as there I sat
disconsolate, and never touched a crust.
Then she stood over me and chided me:

‘Why sit at table mute, Odysseus?
Are you mistrustful of my bread and drink?
Can it be treachery that you fear again,
after the gods’ great oath I swore for you?’
I turned to her at once, and said:

‘Circe,
where is the captain who could bear to touch
this banquet, in my place? A decent man
would see his company before him first.
Put heart in me to eat and drink- you may
by freeing my companions. I must see them.’

But Circe had already turned away.
Her long staff in her hand, she left the hall
and opened up the sty. I saw her enter,
driving those men turned swine to stand before me.
She stroked them, each in turn with some new chrism;
and then, behold! Their bristles fell away,
the coarse pelt grown upon them by her drug
melted away, and they were men again,
younger, more handsome, taller than before.
Their eyes upon me, each one took my hands,
and wild regret and longing pierced them through,
so the room rang with sobs, and even Circe
pitied that transformation. Exquisite
the goddess looked as she stood near me, saying:

‘Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,
go to the sea beach and sea-breasting ship;
drag it ashore, full length upon the land;
stow gear and stores in rock-holes under cover;
return; be quick; bring all your dear companions.’
Now, being a man, I could not help consenting.
So I went down to the sea beach and the ship,
where I found all my other men on board,
weeping, in despair, along the benches.
Sometimes in farmyards when the cows return
well fed from pasture to the barn, one sees
the pens give way before the calves in tumult,
breaking through to cluster about their mothers,
bumping together, bawling. Just that way
my crew poured round me when they saw me come-
their faces wet with tears as if they saw
their homeland, and the crags of Ithaca,
even the very town where they were born.
And weeping still they all cried out in greeting:

‘Prince, what joy this is, your safe return!
Now Ithaca seems here, and we in Ithaca!
But tell us now, what death befell our friends?’

And speaking gently, I replied:

‘First, we must get the ship
high on the shingle,
and stow our gear and stores in
clefts of rock

for cover. Then come follow me, to see
your shipmates in the magic house of Circe
eating and drinking, endlessly regaled.’



They turned back, as commanded, to this work; Only
one lagged, and tried to hold the others: Eurylochus it
was, who blurted out:

‘Where now, poor remnants? Is it devil’s work
you long for? Will you go to Circe’s hall?
Swine, wolves and lions she will make us all,
beasts of her courtyard, bound by her enchantment.
Remember those the Cyclops held; remember
shipmates who made that visit with Odysseus!
The daring man! They died for his foolishness!’

When I heard this I had a mind to draw
the blade that swung against my side and chop him,
bowling his head upon the ground- kinsman
or no kinsman, close to me though he was.
But others came between, saying, to stop me,

‘Prince, we can leave him, if you say the word;
let him stay here on guard. As for ourselves,
show us the way to Circe’s magic hall.’

So all turned inland, leaving shore and ship,
and Eurylochus-he, too, came on behind,
fearing the rough edge of my tongue. Meanwhile
at Circe’s hands the rest were gently bathed, anointed
with sweet oil, and dressed afresh
in tunics and new cloaks with fleecy linings.
We found them all at supper when we came.
But greeting their old friends once more, the crew
could not hold back their tears; and now again
the rooms rang with sobs. Then, Circe, loveliest
of all immortals, came to counsel me:

‘Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,
enough of weeping fits. I know-I, too-
what you endured upon the inhuman sea,
what odds you met on land from hostile men. Remain
with me, and share my meat and wine; restore behind
your ribs those gallant hearts

that served you in the old days, when you sailed
from stony Ithaca. Now parched and spent,
your cruel wandering is all you think of,
never of joy, after so many blows.’

As we were men we could not help consenting.
So by day we lingered, feasting long
on roasts and wine, until a year grew fat.
But when the passing months and
wheeling seasons brought the long
summery days, the pause of summer,
my shipmates one day summoned me and said:



‘Captain, shake off this trance, and think of home-
if home indeed awaits us,
if we shall ever see
your own well-timbered hall on Ithaca.’
They made me feel a pang, and I agreed.
That day, and all day long, from dawn to sundown,
we feasted on roast meat and ruddy wine,
and after sunset when the dusk came on
my men slept in the shadowy hall, but I
went through the dark to Circe’s flawless bed
and took the goddess’ knees in supplication,
urging, as she bent to hear:

‘O Circe,
now you must keep your promise; it is time.
Help me make sail for home. Day after day
my longing quickens, and my company
give me no peace, but wear my heart away
pleading when you are not at hand to hear.’

The loveliest of goddesses replied:

‘Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,
you shall not stay here longer against your will;
but home you may not go
unless you take a strange way round and come
to the cold homes of Death and pale Persephone.
You shall hear prophecy from the rapt shade
of blind Tiresias of Thebes, forever
charged with reason even among the dead;
to him alone, of all the flitting ghosts,
Persephone has given a mind undarkened.’

At this I felt a weight like stone within me,
and, moaning, pressed my length against the bed,
with no desire to see the daylight more...”