

CIRCE

A NOVEL

MADELINE MILLER



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

TITAN DIVINITIES

Aeëtes: Brother of Circe and the sorcerer-king of Colchis, a kingdom on the eastern edge of the Black Sea. Aeëtes was also the father of the mortal witch Medea, and the keeper of the Golden Fleece, until it was stolen by Jason and the Argonauts with Medea's help.

Boreas: The north wind personified. He is responsible, in some myths, for the death of the beautiful youth Hyacinthos. His brothers were Zephyros (the west wind), Notos (the south wind), and Euros (the east wind).

Calypso: A daughter of the Titan Atlas who dwells on the island of Ogygia. In the *Odyssey*, she takes in the shipwrecked Odysseus. Having fallen in love with him, she keeps him on her island for seven years, until the gods command her to release him.

Circe: A witch who lived on the island of Aiaia, daughter of Helios and the nymph Perse. Her name is likely derived from the word for *hawk* or *falcon*. In the *Odyssey*, she turns Odysseus' men into pigs, but after he challenges her, she takes him as a lover, allowing him and his men to stay with her and aiding them when they depart again. Circe has had a long literary life, inspiring writers such as Ovid, James Joyce, Eudora Welty, and Margaret Atwood.

Helios: Titan god of the sun. Father of many children, including Circe, Aeëtes, Pasiphaë, and Perse, as well as their half-sisters, the nymphs Phaethousa and Lampetia. He was most often depicted in his chariot of golden horses, which he drove across the sky each day. In the *Odyssey*, he asks Zeus to destroy Odysseus' men after they kill his sacred cows.

Mnemosyne: A goddess of memory, and mother of the nine muses.

Nereus: An early god of the sea, overshadowed by the Olympian Poseidon. Father of many divine children, including the sea-nymph Thetis.

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Oceanos: In the poetry of Homer, Oceanos is the Titan god of the great fresh-water river Oceanos, which the ancients imagined encircled the world. In later times, he became associated with the sea and salt-water. He is Circe's maternal grandfather, and the father of numerous nymphs and gods.

Pasiphaë: Circe's sister, a powerful witch who marries Zeus' mortal son Minos and becomes queen of Crete. She has several children with him, including Ariadne and Phaedra, and also contrives to become pregnant by a sacred white bull, giving birth to the Minotaur.

Perse: An Oceanid, one of the nymph daughters of Oceanos. The mother of Circe and wife to Helios. In later stories, she was associated with witchcraft herself.

Perses: Circe's brother, associated in some stories with ancient Persia.

Prometheus: A Titan god who disobeyed Zeus to help mortals, giving them fire and, in some stories, teaching them the arts of civilization as well. Zeus punished him by chaining him to a crag in the Caucasus Mountains, where an eagle came every day to tear out and eat his liver, which then regenerated overnight.

Proteus: A shape-shifting god of the sea, guardian of Poseidon's flocks of seals.

Selene: The goddess of the moon, Circe's aunt and Helios' sister. She drove a chariot of silvery horses across the night sky, and her husband was the beautiful shepherd Endymion, a mortal enchanted to eternal, ageless sleep.

Tethys: Titan wife to Oceanos, and Circe's grandmother. Like her husband, she was initially associated with fresh-water but was later depicted as a goddess of the sea.

OLYMPIAN DIVINITIES

Apollo: God of light, music, prophecy, and medicine. Apollo was the son of Zeus and the twin brother of Artemis, and a champion of the Trojans in the Trojan War.

Artemis: Goddess of the hunt, a daughter of Zeus and sister to Apollo. In the *Odyssey*, she is named as the killer of the princess Ariadne.

Athena: The powerful goddess of wisdom, weaving, and war arts. She was a fierce supporter of Greeks in the Trojan War, and a particular guardian of the wily Odysseus. She appears often in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Said to be Zeus' favorite child, she was born from his head fully formed and armored.

Dionysus: A son of Zeus, the god of wine, revelry, and ecstasy. He commanded Theseus to abandon the princess Ariadne, wanting her for his own wife.

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Eileithya: Goddess of childbearing who helped mothers in their labors, and also had the power to prevent a child from being born.

Hermes: Son of Zeus and the nymph Maia, messenger of the gods as well as god of travelers and trickery, commerce, and boundaries. He also led the souls of the dead to the underworld. In some stories Hermes was the ancestor of Odysseus, and in the *Odyssey*, he counsels Odysseus on how to counteract Circe's magic.

Zeus: King of gods and men, ruler of all the world from his throne on Mount Olympus. He initiated the war against the Titans to take vengeance on his father, Kronos, and eventually to overthrow him. Father of many gods and mortals both, including Athena, Apollo, Dionysus, Heracles, Helen, and Minos.

MORTALS

Achilles: Son of the sea-nymph Thetis and King Peleus of Phthia, Achilles was the greatest warrior of his generation, as well as the swiftest and most beautiful. As a teenager, Achilles was offered a choice: long life and obscurity, or short life and fame. He chose fame, and sailed with the other Greeks to Troy. However, in the ninth year of the war he quarreled with Agamemnon and refused to fight any longer, returning to battle only when his beloved Patroclus was killed by Hector. In a rage, he slew the great Trojan warrior and was eventually killed himself by Hector's brother Paris, assisted by the god Apollo.

Agamemnon: Ruler of Mycenae, the largest kingdom in Greece. He served as the over-general of the Greek expedition to retrieve his brother Menelaus' wife, Helen, from Troy. Quarrelsome and proud during the ten years of war, he was murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, upon returning home to Mycenae. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus speaks to his shade in the underworld.

Ariadne: A princess of Crete, daughter of the goddess Pasiphaë and the demigod Minos. When the hero Theseus came to slay the Minotaur, she aided him, giving him a sword and a ball of string to unravel behind him so he could find his way out of the Labyrinth once the creature was dead. Afterwards, she fled with him, and the two planned to marry before the god Dionysus intervened.

Daedalus: A master craftsman, credited with several famous ancient inventions and works of art, including a dancing circle used by Ariadne and the great Labyrinth which jailed the Minotaur. Held captive with his son, Icarus, on Crete, Daedalus devised a plan to free himself, building two sets of wings with wax and feathers. He and Icarus successfully escaped, but Icarus flew too close to the sun, and the wax holding the feathers melted. The boy fell into the sea and drowned.

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Elpenor: A member of Odysseus' crew. In the *Odyssey*, he dies from falling off the roof of Circe's house.

Eurycleia: Odysseus' old nurse, and Telemachus' as well. In the *Odyssey*, she washes the feet of Odysseus when he returns in disguise, and recognizes him because of the scar on his leg, which he earned in a boar hunt in his youth.

Eurylochos: A member of Odysseus' crew, and cousin to Odysseus. In the *Odyssey*, he and Odysseus are often at odds, and he is the one who convinces the other men to kill and eat Helios' sacred cows.

Glaukos: A fisherman who undergoes a transformation after falling asleep in a patch of magical herbs. A version of his story is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Hector: Oldest son of Priam and crown prince of Troy, Hector was known for his strength, nobility, and love of family. In the *Iliad*, Homer shows us a touching scene between Hector; his wife, Andromache; and their young son, Astyanax. Hector is killed by Achilles in vengeance for killing Achilles' lover Patroclus.

Helen: Legendarily the most beautiful woman in the ancient world, Helen was a queen of Sparta, daughter of queen Leda and the god Zeus in the form of a swan. Many men sought her hand in marriage, each swearing an oath (devised by Odysseus) to uphold her union with whatever man prevailed. She was given to Menelaus, but later ran away with the Trojan prince Paris, setting in motion the Trojan War. After the war, she returned home with Menelaus to Sparta, where, Homer tells us, Odysseus' son Telemachus met her looking for information about his father.

Heracles: Son of Zeus and the most famous of the golden-age heroes. Known for his tremendous strength, Heracles was forced to perform twelve labors in penance to the goddess Hera, who hated him for being the product of one of Zeus' affairs.

Icarus: Son of the master craftsman Daedalus. He and his father escaped Crete on sets of wings made from feathers and wax. Icarus ignored his father's warning not to fly too close to the sun, and his wax melted. The wings fell to pieces, dropping Icarus into the sea.

Jason: Prince of Iolcos. Deprived of his throne by his uncle, Pelias, he set out on a quest to prove his worth, bringing home the Golden Fleece, kept by the sorcerer-king of Colchis, Aeëtes. With the help of his patron goddess Hera, Jason secured a ship, the famous *Argo*, and a crew of heroic comrades called the Argonauts. When he arrived on Colchis, King Aeëtes gave him a series of impossible challenges, including yoking two fire-breathing bulls. Aeëtes' daughter, the witch Medea, fell in love with Jason and aided him in his tasks, and they fled together with the fleece.

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Laertes: Odysseus' father and king of Ithaca. Though he is still alive in the *Odyssey*, he has retired from the palace to his estates. He stands with Odysseus against the families of the suitors.

Medea: The daughter of King Aeëtes of Colchis, and niece of Circe. She was a witch like her father and aunt, and when Jason came to claim the Golden Fleece, she used her powers to help him seize it on the condition that he would marry her and take her back with him. The two fled, but Aeëtes pursued them, and only through a bloody trick could Medea keep her father at bay. Her story is told in a number of ancient and modern works, including Euripides' famous tragedy *Medea*.

Minos: A son of Zeus, and the king of powerful Crete. His wife, Pasiphaë, was a goddess and the mother of the Minotaur. Minos demanded that Athens send a tribute of its children in order to feed the monster. After Minos' death, he was given pride of place in the underworld as a judge of the other souls.

Odysseus: The wily prince of Ithaca, favorite of the goddess Athena, husband to Penelope, and father of Telemachus. During the Trojan War, he was one of Agamemnon's chief advisers, and devised the trick of the Trojan horse which won the Greeks the war. His voyage home, which lasted ten years, is the subject of Homer's *Odyssey*, and includes his famous encounters with the cyclops Polyphemus, the witch Circe, the monsters Scylla and Charybdis, and the Sirens. Homer gives him a number of epic epithets, including *polymetis* (man of many wiles), *polytropos* (man of many turnings), and *polytlas* (much-enduring).

Patroclus: Most beloved companion of the hero Achilles, and in many retellings also his lover. In the *Iliad* his fateful decision to try to save the Greeks by dressing in Achilles' armor sets in motion the final act of the story. When Patroclus is killed by Hector, Achilles is devastated and takes brutal vengeance upon the Trojans, which also brings about Achilles' own death. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus sees Patroclus by Achilles' side when he visits the underworld.

Penelope: Cousin to Helen of Sparta, wife of Odysseus, mother of Telemachus, celebrated for her cleverness and faithfulness. When Odysseus failed to come home after the war, she was besieged by suitors who took over her house, trying to pressure her into marrying one of them. She famously promised to choose from among them when a shroud she was weaving was finished. She stalled them this way for years, unweaving every night what she had woven during the day.

Pyrrhus: The son of Achilles, who was instrumental in the sack of Troy. He killed Priam, king of Troy, and in some retellings also Astyanax, Hector's baby, to prevent him from growing up and exacting vengeance.

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Telegonus: The son of Odysseus and Circe, credited as the mythical founder of the cities of Tusculum and Praeneste in Italy.

Telemachus: Odysseus and Penelope's only child, the prince of Ithaca. In the *Odyssey*, Homer shows him helping his father plot and enact his vengeance against the suitors besieging their home.

Theseus: Prince of Athens, sent to Crete as part of Athens' promised tribute of fourteen youths to feed the Minotaur's savage appetite. Instead, Theseus killed the Minotaur with the princess Ariadne's help.

MONSTERS

Charybdis: A powerful whirlpool set on one side of narrow straits, across from the monster Scylla. Ships seeking to avoid Scylla's teeth were swallowed whole.

Minotaur: Named after Minos, the king of Crete, the Minotaur was actually the child of the queen Pasiphaë and a sacred white bull. Daedalus built the Labyrinth to contain the flesh-eating monster, and Minos demanded that Athens send fourteen boys and girls as sacrifices to feed it. One of these was the Athenian prince Theseus, who slew the beast.

Polyphemus: A cyclops (one-eyed giant), and a son of Poseidon. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men land upon Polyphemus' island, enter his cave, and begin eating his stores. When Polyphemus catches them, he traps them in the cave, devouring several of Odysseus' men. Odysseus tricks the monster with friendly words, giving his name as *Outis*, *No one*. He blinds the monster to escape, and as he sails off, he reveals his true name. Polyphemus calls on his father, Poseidon, to punish Odysseus.

Scylla: According to Homer, a ferocious monster with six heads and twelve dangling legs who hid in a cave on one side of narrow straits, across from the whirlpool Charybdis. When boats passed she would dart down, snatch up a sailor in each of her mouths, and devour them. In later depictions she was given the head of a woman, a sea-monster tail, and savage dogs erupting from her belly. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Scylla was originally a nymph who was transformed into a monster.

Sirens: Often depicted with women's heads and birds' bodies, the Sirens perched atop craggy rocks, singing. Their voices were so sweet that men would forget their reason when hearing them. In the *Odyssey*, Circe advises Odysseus to put beeswax in his men's ears so as to pass safely, and further suggests that he tie himself to the mast with his own ears free, so he may be the first to hear their enchanting song and live.