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Patroclus and Circe: Subverting Femininity and Heroism in Madeline Miller's Selected Novels

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ABSTRACT

The existing scholarship on masculine heroism and feminine vulnerability analyses this binary opposition predominantly through the frame of gender politics. This study departs from such frames of analysis and examines how Madeline Miller challenges and reconfigures the gendered construction of heroism as masculine in her fictional narratives. Our research examines how the protagonists in the selected works of Miller redistribute traits that are traditionally coded as masculine and feminine by foregrounding the elements of care, vulnerability, empathy and nurturance in a male hero, and courage, strategic thinking, autonomy, wrath and power in a female protagonist. Drawing on the theoretical concepts of "Écriture féminine" by Hélène Cixous and "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" by Ursula K. Le Guin, this research endeavours to unpack how Miller's revisions of the Greek mythical stories of Patroclus and Circe challenge the narrative of a "killer story" of warfare fiction that equates a heroic identity with violence and conquest. By exploring Patroclus as a nurturing, emotionally present, non-violent hero and Circe as a strategically powerful female figure, this article contributes to the existing feminist literary criticism by highlighting that Miller's fiction is not just inclusive of women or softening of men, but presents an alternative narrative framework where feminine agency emerges as an agentic force rather than a vulnerable, marginal presence.

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Introduction

The study explores Madeline Miller's subversion of traditional gendered ideals of masculinity and femininity by reconfiguring these archetypes in the novels *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*. Exploring the destabilisation of the conventionally celebrated image of a dominant, violent, masculine hero by foregrounding Patroclus, the main narrator in *The Song of Achilles*, as a nurturing and empathetic war hero with all feminine-coded qualities in the spotlight, and portraying Circe as an agentic witch and a warrior woman, this research highlights how these texts dismantle the hegemonic gendered construction of femininity as vulnerable and weak. This study evaluates Miller's interrogation and breakdown of the dominant hegemonic narrative of gender and heroism, showcasing how a masculine subject can enact the feminine-coded attributes of care, vulnerability, empathy and sensitivity, while traits traditionally associated with masculinity, such as heroism, courage, rationality, and cunning, can also be embodied by female characters. This study demonstrates how the relocation of these gendered attributes across bodies reconceptualises the binary conception of gendered agency and power.

Equating women with tenderness and vulnerability, and men with power and control, supports the gendered binary that Miller's protagonists challenge. Attributes such as care, nourishment, protection, encouragement, love, and safety are associated with women's role as a nurturer. Such attributions contribute to the construction of biased conceptions about women. When women are primarily portrayed as affectionate, vulnerable beings, their existence is often reduced to being passive and secondary figures. In contrast, a male figure is evaluated based on his courage and capacity to stay in control. Therefore, this study focuses on the binary opposition between masculine strength and feminine weakness to analyse the system that celebrates this binary and demonstrates how Miller's protagonists subvert this gendered dichotomy.

Existing scholarship on masculine heroism and feminine vulnerability in the context of warfare fiction interrogates the historical construction of the archetype of the masculine hero, who is categorised as strong, dominant and emotionally controlled. Critical gender and warfare studies have demonstrated that the figure of a hero implicitly remains masculine. Going to war, fighting on a battlefield, and shedding the blood of their enemies become signifiers of masculinity. In this context, war is treated as a "test of manhood" where victory achieved by the male figures confirms their masculine heroic identities (Goldstein 5). Thus, a heroic identity inevitably becomes masculine. Suzana Marly Magalhães mentions that the archetype of a hero as masculine is "embodied as the essence of the virile educational model. Also, it is embodied, in the long run, in some qualities attributed to the ideal warrior/soldier..." suggesting how supposedly masculine characteristics of competitiveness, risk-taking, rationality, physical strength and dominant nature become the ideals of a heroic identity (Magalhães 100).

The central premise of the discourse around warfare fiction is to highlight how male figures are idealised for their heroic qualities while female figures are positioned within supporting roles of a mother, wife or nurturer. In many war narratives, women are positioned in supporting roles as mothers, wives, or nurturers, or are represented as "prostitutes, victims, war support workers, and replacement labor for men at war" (Goldstein 6), thereby reinforcing men as ideal warriors. Within the existing frameworks of thought around these gendered constructions, the focus remains on highlighting how women can also participate in wars by offering support from the domestic ground,

such as taking care of the wounded and war-affected soldiers. What remains un-theorised is the notion that mere mentions of female representations in warfare fiction do not necessarily reduce the gendered stereotypical portrayals because heroism is still coded as masculine. This is where our study intervenes to address how Miller has challenged and subverted the masculine war-hero archetype.

Our study of the protagonist of *The Song of Achilles*, Patroclus, as a non-violent, empathetic hero breaks away from the normative narrative of celebrating masculinity as the legitimate form of heroism and destabilises the notion that heroism is portrayed through masculine violence. Similarly, the exploration of the female protagonist of *Circe* reveals how Miller dismantles the hero-archetype, not just by expanding Circe's role within the narrative itself, but by relocating gendered attributes across bodies. Circe's character subverts the hegemonic gendered construction of femininity as weak and vulnerable, as she firmly positions and celebrates herself as an agentic witch and is perceived as a warrior woman. Therefore, Patroclus is a male figure who embodies feminine attributes of care, vulnerability, empathy, and sensitivity, and Circe is the female figure who embodies the masculine attributes of courage, rationality and heroism. This research reads Miller's characterisation of Patroclus and Circe as a reconfiguration of masculinity and femininity in warfare contexts, challenging the notion of violent masculine heroes and portraying femininity as active and heroic rather than passive.

Language and Feminine Power: Rewriting the Heroic Subjectivity

This study adopts a qualitative research method and employs the technique of close textual analysis. The primary texts for this research are *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* by Madeline Miller. The theoretical sources for this study are Hélène Cixous's "Écriture féminine" and Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction". The secondary sources for this research include journal articles and theoretical essays that are related to the conceptual framework of this study.

Our research unpacks how the theoretical concepts of "Écriture féminine" and "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" are used to highlight the reconfiguration of normative gendered construction of heroism, which valorises masculine strength while marginalising feminine power. Studying the selected novels through these theoretical lenses, this study navigates the displacement of the phallogocentric ideal of mastery and masculine power to foreground feminine power and care. This research asks two fundamental questions: In what ways do these novels resist the hegemonic construction of masculine heroism as violent? How do the selected novels present a framework for the reconceptualisation of femininity as a formative force that redefines feminine agency?

Cixous, in her essay "Sorties: Out and Out: attacks/ways out/forays", presents her views on the concept of mastery. She says that "The same masters dominate history from the beginning, inscribing on it the marks of their appropriating economy: history, as a story of phallogocentrism, hasn't moved except to repeat itself" (Cixous 204). This mastery is neither an ontological essence nor an innate phenomenon but a socially linguistically constructed ideology. She argues that it renders knowledge inaccessible and sacred via repression (204). In a metaphorical sense, her categorisation of mastery in phallogocentric terms reveals how it upholds and also reproduces the dominant signifiers in society. Amy S. Crawford adds to Cixous's concept of master as she argues that "Like the phallus, mastery –as that which possesses, contains, and transmits knowledge/power– establishes, contains, and perpetuates meaning" (Crawford 43-44). A phallus as a signifier contains multiple signifieds;

thereby, mastery constructs meaning via the combinations of these multiple signifiers, which are then associated with masculinity. For Cixous, to escape such constructions of mastery, one must turn to writing, which is the nexus of the theory of *écriture féminine*, which then “dis/rupt established grouping and arrangement of signifiers” (44). Therefore, to reimagine a feminine rhetoric, mastery must be escaped, and Cixous believes that the very act of writing can be used as a medium for this escape, which ultimately subverts the established combination and enactment of signifiers.

This theoretical lens translates into a linguistic framework dictating how masculinist discourses construct hierarchical binaries, such as masculine/feminine and reason/emotion. The naturalisation of the masculine/feminine binary that celebrates male heroism and marginalises women is perpetuated through language to maintain the dominant masculine order. Cixous mentions in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” that, “I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural-hence political, typically masculine-economy;” (879). She argues that language imposes a phallogentric, gallant, and inflexible image of the male that asserts the female as the weaker, non-beneficial sex and sustains the masculine/feminine binary.

Binary oppositions primarily constructed by language become prevalent in a hierarchical society. These binary oppositions give rise to hierarchical binary thought, thereby insisting on a relationship of domination and subjugation between masculine and feminine terms. Since logocentrism associates all origins with masculinity; therefore creativity, originality, and vitality are also alluded to as masculine. Consequently, women are excluded from writing practices due to Western philosophical thought that associates the tradition of writing with a rational (male) subject, thereby prioritising reason over emotion and competition over nurturing. Therefore, examining Cixous’s exploration of binary thinking and the prevalence of mastery is pertinent to our study as it supports our argument and explores the reason behind the West’s celebration of a violent war hero. This study suggests that a new system of signs must be envisioned, which is gender-neutral; arguing for the need to envision new histories where biases are no longer relevant.

Lois Tyson, in her book *Critical Theory Today*, mentions that women, as the source of life, are themselves the source of power (96). Therefore, by advocating a feminine discourse over mastery, Cixous envisions a kind of writing which celebrates feminine presence, with all the associated qualities, to grant praise to femininity. She utilises *écriture féminine*, which is believed to be fluidly organised and freely associative, to discard patriarchal binary thinking (96). She attempts to resist and refuse mastery, and devises what Torill Moi calls a “dense web of signifiers”, which resembles a web where the structure is laid out in a linear plane, entangled with each other, thread by thread (13). In undoing mastery, Cixous attempts to disrupt the social structure by disturbing its linguistic foundation. Therefore, if the signs are reconstructed and revisited, the world can be thought of and visualised in a completely different manner. Based on Cixous’ idea of disrupting patriarchal language through *écriture féminine*, we in this study attempt to evaluate how Miller resists traditional and patriarchal rhetorical expectations of a linear argument. We seek to foreground how, through the disruption of the predetermined linguistic structures, Miller reshapes the historical narrative of a hero as masculine by portraying a man as delicate and soft-hearted, and a woman as the bearer of power, giving rise to an essential social change. This reshaping disturbs the linguistic thread via connotative meanings and re-attributing significance to them.

Le Guin supplements Cixous’s linguistic critique through her narratological intervention that foregrounds the illustration of women in battle narratives. In her “Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction”, she claims that the history of man has been viewed monolithically, with a significantly constructive

narrative in terms of battle, male heroes, weapons, and action. However, she believes that the real stories are not in the accounts of “sticks and spears and swords” but in the accounts of the items gathered in bags by the ones who are not the hunters but are carriers and gatherers. Le Guin describes the carrier bag as “the thing to put things in, the container for the things contained,” which she identifies as the basis of a new story (29).

We employ Le Guin’s “Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” to highlight how traditional forms of storytelling concerned with a hero’s (male) journey and adventures are rejected. Studying Cixous’s conceptualisation of the masculinist construction of language in relation to Le Guin’s discussion of the prevalent narrative of a dominant male hero, it is highlighted how the feminine narrative of carrier/bag/container is ignored. However, as Sarah M. Flores highlights in her article “The Female Alien/Other: Looking Outside the ‘Origins of Man’ To See Inside the Origins of Woman/Alien/Cyborg”, this overlooked narrative follows not the tale of a masculine violent hero but the tale of the mother, gatherer, and vessel (Flores 1).

Instead of a “killer story” about the “Ascent of Man” going to war, Le Guin then proposes a shift from hero-centric stories of action, violence and success, featuring masculinist weapons of mastery and power, and linear temporalities of conquest and destruction, to the life-sustaining stories about the container (Sayers and Martin 9). She presents an alternative narrative that is tied to the prehistoric gatherers. Carrier/bag/vessel is presented as a tool that enables the collection of sustenance as Le Guin explains its importance by expounding that one’s food may escape him if he has not “something to put it in”; so she asks whether it would not be sufficient if one has something to take the food with both hands, maybe “A holder, A recipient” (150). Life is sustained by collecting and storing nourishment; therefore, Le Guin’s theory supplements our argument of an alternative narrative presented by Miller in her fictional texts, which shows the ascent of man as a hero as false, hollow, and inevitably unsustainable. The sheer magnitude of the importance of the vessel overshadows the hero myth. It foregrounds the importance of femininity in the growth of humanity and presents the feminine subject as a nurturer, provider, and sustainer.

The masculinist narrative of warfare fiction celebrates the killer instinct as the explanatory basis for the emergence of humans at the top of the food chain. However, Le Guin shows the importance of women in humanity’s survival and sustenance. Instead of focusing on the individual, this alternative narrative focuses on the intertextual relationship of the protagonist with multiple communities and related ecosystems. The alternative version acknowledges the cycle of influences that represent the whole experience, not just the lone hero (Flores 3). Le Guin’s theoretical discussion supplements our argument that privileges collective and sustaining activities, such as those of a gatherer/sustainer, over the myth of a violent lone hero whose identity is characterised through weapons and conquests. It redirects attention from supposedly masculinist, destructive contours of a heroic identity to more cooperative and relational practices that sustain life.

Together, the theoretical insights gathered from both theories produce an alternative framework that subverts the hegemonic gendered binary in heroic narratives. In light of these theoretical concepts, this article aims to explore Miller’s fictional texts as a narratological project that exposes and redefines the masculine/feminine binary in warfare fiction. Specifically situating our study within the context of Greek mythological fictional narrative, this research interprets how the selected fictional texts by Miller subvert the dominant myth of a hero as violent and masculine, and also provides an alternative narrative construction where heroic identity is grounded in care, relationality and feminine agency. The ontological critique presented by Cixous and the narratological

alternative proposed by Le Guin present a new model of storytelling: one that values substance, relationality, and communal practices over conquests.

Disrupting Androcentric Masculinity: Reimagination of Patroclus as a Nurturer in *The Song of Achilles*

This section explores Miller's subversion of the traditional narratological structure of a killer story, one that relates heroic identity with violence, conquest and bloodshed. Miller's *The Song of Achilles* dismantles the masculinist narrative associated with heroism through the characterisation of Patroclus. This study interprets him as a war hero who is not defined by killer instincts but through his capacity for nurturance, emotional attachment, and protective impulses. We argue that Miller employs the technique of feminine writing to challenge the structures of patriarchal language to foreground the crucial role of femininity in the success of a warfare narrative. By portraying Patroclus as an empathetic war hero whose identity is rooted in his compassionate, tender, and feminine nature, Miller proposes an alternative to the war-hero narrative.

A hero's actions are celebrated on the forefront of a warfare narrative, while affective sentiments of love, care, relationality, and grief are pushed to the background of the story (Soundariya 155). This is because the affective dimension of these emotions neither intensifies violence nor supplements the hero's valour. Thus, they are insignificant to be presented directly to the audience. Tenderness, warmth, care, protection, joy, compassion, and adoration are constructed as feminine attributes, unfit for the violence of a battleground, which is why they are deemed as insignificant in a killer war story. Miller's portrayal of Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles* challenges the rigid ideals of a dominant, violent male hero and presents an alternative picture of a war hero whose emotional sentiments, feminine delicacies, and devoted existence make him a hero worthy of praise. This paper attempts to highlight how Miller uses feminine writing to disrupt the binary structures of the patriarchal language and, in so doing, foregrounds femininity's crucial role in the story's success through the characterisation of Patroclus.

In the novel, Miller portrays Patroclus not as a savage male hero who would naturally pay attention to the details of battle, but as a man whose nature is more inclined towards the softness of life. His consciousness is not oriented towards the regulation of kingdoms or the transformation into a skilled soldier. Instead, his interest lies within the stillness of a moment. He embodies the true essence of *écriture féminine*, as articulated by Cixous: an urge to think beyond the established 'law of the father'. Through feminine writing, she urges a deconstruction of gendered hierarchies that shape the very pattern of the androcentric world, a world in which men are not conceived as lovers, nurturers, or emotional subjects. In Miller's fictional narrative, Patroclus subverts these generalised characteristics. He is portrayed as an emotional and compassionate hero who possesses what Le Guin terms as a carrier bag: a vessel/bag that is capable of holding affectionate elements of love, care, grief, compassion and relationality, instead of violence.

Miller's characterisation of Patroclus subverts the masculinist image of a heroic identity by foregrounding his observant, tender and empathetically attuned gaze. For instance, unlike the other fellow trainee soldiers who would brag about their new achievements or "a spear and a bird that had died on the beach and the spring races" in their practice hours, Patroclus would admire and adore his friend Achilles (Miller, *The Song of Achilles* 20). He would observe the colour of his skin, which is

like “pressed olive oil and smooth as polished wood, without the scabs and blemishes that covered the rest of us” (20). He would also pay attention to details sensitively; these details did not include the shapes of weapons or strategies for fighting one’s enemy, but he traced the features of the person he admired. This portrayal shifts the focus from the violent, weaponry nature of a conquest to relational and aesthetic details of Achilles’ body through the eyes of Patroclus. The protagonist of a marvellous war story would narrate his battles, the number of men he killed, and boast about his victories. Patroclus, however, is only concerned with “the perfectly formed pads of the toes, the tendons that flickered like lyre strings” of his friend (31). When Achilles and Patroclus became friends, their interactions did not involve the usual instances of violent actions. Instead, they conversed about the beach, the winds, and the dinners (31). Such a portrayal of a male character contrasts with the phallogocentric image associated with masculinity, as Patroclus defies the supposedly hegemonic ideals associated with men and is seen as a character with feminine delicacies.

Patroclus’s love for music, nature, and sentimental experiences, his admiration for Achilles, and Miller’s affectionate narrative tone construct a war hero whose capacity for love, care and compassion defines his strength as a hero. This infuses the texts with sentimental emotions rather than violent impulses. For instance, while others enjoyed their spears and swords, the only enjoyment for Patroclus was how beautifully Achilles would play his mother’s lyre, and he would lovingly watch him and ask him to play again (Miller, *The Song of Achilles* 35). Patroclus’s attachment to his friend is apparent as he refuses to stay away from him. Miller’s hero is consumed by love, which turns out to be his greatest strength. He is the one narrating the story, and Miller has constructed the tone of her novel with a tender touch. It is as if the narrator is a female character who enriches the plot with feelings of love, desire, sadness, and vexation instead of violence and savagery.

Cixous, through her conceptualisation of language as a discourse of mastery, has postulated how language celebrates a warrior. He is a man who exercises his power and control over the army and becomes a master of all those things he wins at war. His image is of a gallant soldier, daring and fearless, who fights for fame and honour. Battleground is his tapestry on which he weaves his story with weapons and blood. Fighting in war and spilling blood are not the arts where Patroclus could excel, and he comes to realise it when he stays with Chiron. He is disgusted by the experience of war and the long hours of “nauseating chaos” (Miller 170). It is unbearable for him to witness the “ugliness of deaths” (170). He is unable to tolerate seeing brains out of the skulls and the shattering of bones. He does not find any shame in it and truly accepts the reality that battlegrounds sicken him and that he could never be a skilled soldier (64). Instead, he shows interest in medicine and surgery.

For instance, under Chiron’s guidance, he further crafts his techniques and becomes skilled in surgery. This is how Miller subverts the traditional ideals of patriarchal language by granting the job of taking care of the injured to her male protagonist. This task is often woven with the female characters who would attend to the injured warriors in their tents and nurse them back to health. However, in Miller’s novel, Patroclus is a nurse to all those warriors who are brutally affected by the Trojan War. When he attends to his very first patient, anxiety dwells on his shoulders, yet he follows his instincts and performs the surgery as he “grabbed a salve for infection and carefully coated the wound” (Miller, *The Song of Achilles* 178). Then with utmost care, he “wrapped and packed the wound, binding it in a sort of sling across his chest” (178). Patroclus is a man who rejoices in his talents. He knows the relevance of his existence lies away from all the actions of the world and that his hands are best suited, not to throw spears but to mend the wounds caused by them. He healed those men who were damaged by war, and he is a vessel of comfort for Achilles. When Achilles would come to the tent after patrolling the battlefield, Patroclus was always there to give him company, ease his tensions, and offer him solace.

Miller also paints Patroclus with the contours of a nurturer for Achilles. Patroclus is guided by emotions, and his actions are influenced by the deep affection he has for Achilles. Even when Achilles' mother, Thetis, informs him that Achilles will soon die, Patroclus refuses to abandon him. This revelation did not stop Patroclus from joining Achilles, his companion, in the war from which he might never return. Patroclus disregards the dangers he would face and is only concerned with protecting Achilles and stopping the prophecy of Achilles' death from being fulfilled. The way he perceives Achilles, all his feminine delicacies are revealed: "When he died, all things soft and beautiful and bright would be buried with him" (Miller, *The Song of Achilles* 119). Afraid that Achilles would meet his death if they were separated, Patroclus decides to accompany him to the war. These instances highlight that Patroclus subverts the rigid gendered construction of a war hero as violent because his heroic identity is categorised through protective devotion, nurturance and emotional commitment rather than aggression and greed for domination. He joins the war not to receive glory and kill the enemies, but for the reason that he is the only one who can protect Achilles. His purpose in joining the war is based on relational and protective principles, and not rooted in being recognised as a martial hero. Patroclus's nature reveals the aesthetics of emotional sensitivity rather than masculine hardness, thus challenging the image of a hero as unfeeling and brutal.

In this way, through the characterisation of Patroclus as a feminine war hero, Miller also dismantles the conventions of a "killer story" which posits that an ideal, heroic story is fundamentally a story of violent and merciless killings and competition. It is usually believed that an ideal historical narrative must be the one in which two contrasting narratives, ideologies, or people compete and fight with each other. And in the end, only one must emerge as a winner and a true hero. Taking a cue from Le Guin's study, this notion of a killer story is challenged as a spear's violent logic is questioned and challenged by bringing forth the idea of a carrier bag, the role of femininity, container, and care in the success of the story. This shifts the focus from competition and domination to gathering and nurturing. As seen in Miller's characterisation of Patroclus, the narrative values care, protection, and relational devotion over conquest. Miller utilises a carrier bag method of storytelling where there are no violent heroes, suggesting the importance of collective endeavours in the success of a war story.

A nurturer is someone whose love, care, support, and protection resemble the sentiments of a parent, sibling, or partner. Patroclus is the trusted comrade of Achilles, and these deep feelings drive Patroclus to take care of him. Although Achilles is the most celebrated warrior and does not need any protection, Patroclus is always there to be his shield. Achilles' honour is his most prized possession. As Patroclus narrates, it is his "dearest child, his dearest self", and he knows how much he cherishes it (Miller, *The Song of Achilles* 212). He would not bargain anything for his honour, and Patroclus knows that Achilles' pride is his greatest vulnerability. When Achilles refuses to fight, Patroclus realises that it would be the end of his glory and honour. So, the only way to protect Achilles is to guard his honour. Patroclus then decides to join the battlefield dressed in Achilles' armour to create the impression that Achilles is the one fighting. This is a very brave decision for a man who is nauseated by bloodshed, but, as it is a matter of great honour for Achilles, his most cherished companion Patroclus, becomes determined to risk his life for the sake of Achilles' honour. A savage hero does not have any space for feelings of love and care; thus, he only indulges in such actions that bring him honour and praise. However, it is Patroclus' devotion that makes him a hero of this narrative. His care and devotion are to be worshipped, as he has always loved, enjoyed, appreciated, and protected Achilles. By going to war with Achilles, guarding his honour by jeopardising his own life, and devoting himself to care and affection even after his death, Patroclus proves that his traits of care and protection make him a hero, not the instincts of a killer.

In conclusion, Miller's characterisation of Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles* subverts the gendered construction of a war hero as violent, aggressive, and unemotional. Through the act of feminine writing, Miller dismantles the hegemonic system that defines masculinity through the absence of tenderness and emotional sensitivity. Patroclus emerges as a feminine hero in Miller's narrative, whose strength lies in his capacity as a nurturer and an affectionate, non-violent being with protective impulses rather than destructive ones. This characterisation reconfigures the ideals of heroism, defining them as the strength to love, care and protect rather than the courage to sustain mastery through violence and domination. In doing so, this text challenges the logic of a "killer story" in normative warfare narratives and proposes an alternative framework that celebrates nurturance as the true marker of heroic success.

Subversion of Feminine Weakness: Reevaluating Feminine Vulnerability in *Circe*

This section interprets how Miller's characterisation of Circe disrupts the patriarchal narrative of warfare fiction by portraying Circe in opposition to the roles traditionally ascribed to women. The tradition of storytelling, particularly in warfare fiction, has celebrated male figures who embody brute masculinity as the prototypes for the main protagonist. A hero's identity is defined through the attributes of intelligence, strategic thinking, courage, competence, and authority, traits traditionally coded as masculine. These traits construct the archetypal role of a hero that the patriarchal narratives celebrate. This study explores Circe as a competent, authoritative, courageous, strategic thinker, through which Miller reclaims feminine agency as Circe is recognised not only as a marginal witch, but a female hero marked by intelligence and autonomy.

The celebrated quality of masculine protagonists is intelligence and their capacity for rage. This is characterised by the brilliance with which they unmask their enemy's strategies; their control over the kingdom; execution of power, and the strategic ways of gathering information at the time of war. They are capable enough to unpack what their enemies have been plotting against them. These masculine heroes are read as competent leaders due to their sharp intellect (Åse & Wendt 4). However, Miller has presented her character Circe in a very sharp contrast to the roles normally associated with female characters.

Building on the insights of Cixous's *écriture féminine*, this paper explores how language is unstable and free-floating, and how women must speak through their "bodies" to explore the beauty of the "unconscious," as Cixous mentions, "Write your self. Your body must be heard" as the act of writing will grant the woman "her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal" (Cixous, *Laugh* 880). This practice subverts the gendered dichotomies that shape the patriarchal system of language. Cixous' language transcends the boundaries of fixed meanings, which enables Miller to characterise Circe in a way which dismantles the traditional linguistic parameters, allowing her to reclaim her "buried voice"; thereby "escaping the language of the father" (Cixous, *Laugh* 875).

Circe is represented as a fearless warrior woman and a witch as she gathers the experiences of life to transform herself from a naive nymph to a great sorcerer and a warrior woman. She is depicted as a witch who is clever and ruthless; she possesses the intellect to read the person in front of her and determine the script of his character. For instance, during her initial encounters with Hermes, she was unsuccessful in uncovering his secrets that he so effortlessly conceals from her. But later on, she

learns how he shares only selective knowledge with her, which does not threaten his existence. He was a god from the trickster lineage who never provided direct answers to her queries and knew precisely when to withdraw from her audience. In earlier encounters, she would share secrets with him, information that he could exploit against her, yet through her character development, she learns to conceal them and reveal only what is necessary. For instance, as she recalls how in the earlier days, she would have “rushed forth with a brimming cup of answers” in order to provide him what he so long wanted (Miller, *Circe* 73). However, over the course of time, Circe acknowledges her transformation as she declares that she “owed him nothing... he would have of me only what I wanted to give” (73). Circe becomes the witch known for her magic and art of transformation through her wit and cleverness. These factors play a vital role in Miller’s strategies, which granted Circe the power of control.

The growth of Circe is fundamentally rooted in her wit, cleverness and intelligence. This instance is not merely a supernatural transformation within the narrative, but a strategic reconfiguration of feminine recognition. Circe elevates herself from being demonised as a witch to being recognised as a competent, authoritative and courageous witch whose feminine agency is self-determined. Circe employs strategic thinking in learning to conceal certain information from Hermes and, in doing so, projects her agency in controlling her own narrative.

Miller subverts the standardised depiction of male heroes by granting dominance to an exiled feminine figure, as Circe narrates: “Anywhere I was became my temple” (Miller, *Circe* 130). This is evident when her son Telegonus brings Odysseus’s wife, Penelope, and their son, Telemachus to her island Aiaia. Circe remains suspicious of her new guests’ stay. It is through her wit that she realises how Penelope is a threat to her son’s life. There she projects her authority as she stands her ground and confronts Penelope gravely by reiterating that “I can spot the spider in her web... Speak, or I will use my power” (Miller, *Circe* 259). The gravity in her gestures and tone precisely translates her agency, telling the opposite party who actually holds the power.

We have evaluated how language reveals patriarchal binary thought, which can be defined as seeing the world in terms of opposites, such as head/heart, father/mother, and culture/nature, one of which is considered superior. Cixous argues that women bear the right side of each of these oppositions: the side that patriarchy considers inferior. Meanwhile, men supposedly occupy the left side of each binary: the side that patriarchy prevails as superior. She notes that “the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition activity/passivity” (Cixous, *Sorties* 92). In other words, patriarchal thinking believes that women are born to be passive while men are born to be active because it is natural for the sexes to be different in this way. This answers the question of why prehistoric men are always superior and valorised. It is due to their courage and the examples they have been setting of bravery for centuries. The accounts of power, valour, savageness, and courage are all associated with the violent masculine figure, making them the hero of every story. Miller challenges this notion by vividly depicting Circe as an embodiment of bravery. Circe is the brave heroine of this novel. Despite being a female, she dislikes herself for being passive. Therefore, we see her as a character who carries out the actions traditionally connected to masculinity.

Miller gives us multiple instances showcasing Circe’s courage that is born through her emotional nature. Circe is depicted as an extremely emotional and overprotective mother as she seeks to protect her precious son from the goddess who wants him dead. Athena, the goddess of war, declares that her son, Telegonus, is destined to perform a task that will make Circe sorry for his life. She coaxes her with delicate words, but Circe does not let herself sway by the goddess’s sweet tongue. She defends herself, challenges the god of war, who seeks her son’s death, and to protect her son from

Athena's wrath, she travels into the dark depths of the ocean to win the deadliest weapon. She is determined to protect her son at all costs and firmly threatens the goddess, as she narrates: "You do not know what I can do" (Miller, *Circe* 201). When her son reaches the age of fifteen, he demands to sail to Ithaca to meet his father. Circe, worried about Athena's fury, ventures to the depths of the ocean to plead for the deadliest weapon, which can cause pain even to a god. It is her bravery and the strength of her character that make her capable enough to strike a bargain with the mighty god who possesses that lethal weapon. She meets Trygon, a stingray who is known for having the most poisonous tail. She wants to win that tail from him so she can make it a weapon for her son to protect himself. There is a price for every bargain, and Trygon demands an eternal price: "If you would take my tail, you must first submit to its poison. That is the price" (224). Circe agrees without hesitation and consents to bear the agonising pain for eternity. This example shows the power of a nurturer's love and strength, foregrounding Le Guin's ideal of a carrier bag.

Furthermore, Circe's agentic nature is foregrounded in her capacity for revenge. When sailors land on her island, she receives them with hospitality, yet her kindness is repaid with brutal assault. She goes through the most excruciating moment of her life, as she narrates: "A mortal would have fainted, but I was awake for every moment" (Miller 150). After the captain finishes assaulting her, she unleashes her wrath and speaks the curse, turning every man into a swine. She then finished her revenge by slaughtering all of them. She is determined to punish those who seek to take advantage of her, as she vows, she will hurt them as she has been hurt. She enjoys as she "savours their confusion and dawning fear" while their "backs are bent" as she forces them to stand on their "hands and knees, faces bloating like drowned corpses" with their screams and wails breaking into squeals (154).

Through the characterisation of Circe as a warrior woman, Miller serves to deconstruct the traditional masculine/feminine gendered opposition. By asserting the dominance of a woman's body through narratological structure, Miller offers a new signifying order allowing Circe to not only remain as a marginalized figure but also to be reimagined as a source of power, wrath, and agency. In this way, the singular or monolithic ideal of a masculine hero is disrupted, giving rise to a plural and heterogeneous idea of feminine agency. As Cixous explicates, the women's speech is associated with the voice of the mother and a womb world, a world not bound by hierarchies and domination, but by nourishment and circularity (Cixous 882-83). By depicting Circe as a warrior woman and also retaining her emotional potential, Miller foregrounds the role of femininity as the driving force in the success of a story. It implies that a successful story does not necessarily need a male warrior hero. Rather, it emphasises the role of a nurturer and a vessel, which Le Guin postulates in her "Carrier Bag Theory".

Moreover, Circe is also shown as a character who bestows extreme reverence to the natural environment. She can understand how the elements of nature work. Being a witch, she is not only limited to brewing spells and casting charms, but she has also developed a mutual affinity with nature and animals. Just like any Greek god or goddess has their animal, Circe decides to summon the animal that would connote her strength and power; a lioness. She loves the lioness fiercely as she provides her with company and protection during her first few years on the island. However, when she dies, Circe handles her body all by herself for the sake of their friendship. She builds the lioness's pyre with her own hands and sends her beloved companion to flames (Miller, *Circe* 145-146). Miller's depiction of Circe as a nurturer and guardian of nature deploys the ideals of feminine writing and carrier bag theory. It is the mutual empathy between Circe and the non-human life that she is able to not only heal nature, but in turn, is healed by it. Nature offers her herbs, plants, and flowers so she can continue experimenting with her magic. In return, she takes care of the island and devotes herself to the animals (122). For many centuries, she has lived on the island, and it provides her with everything she

needs: protection, shelter, authority and power. The mutual relationship between Circe and nature is built upon friendship, cooperation, and reverence, which is in sharp contrast with the patriarchal narratives of a hero, which is “a story of sticking, bashing and killing—the killer story” (Le Guin 4). However, Miller offers a new version of storytelling that Le Guin terms as a “life story” because it is not a story about wars, weapons, and killings; rather, it is about nourishment and gathering (4).

Therefore, *Circe* emerges as a radical text that reimagines femininity in opposition to female passivity, vulnerability and violent heroism. Through Circe’s enactment of intelligence, courage and revenge along with maternal devotion and her bond with nature, Miller’s fictional text proposes a feminine figure as agentic, active and powerful. Her character is not defined by submissiveness, rather she emerges as a heroine whose strength is not dictated by violence but by relational power, dismantling the logic of a violent killer story.

Conclusion

This study contended that Miller has challenged the hegemonic patriarchal gendered assumptions that have shaped the literary representations and its representations of heroism, gender and power. Miller, through the character of Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles*, has reimagined the archetype of a war hero, who is not a violent conqueror but a delicate figure who embodies tenderness, care and emotional sensitivity. Patroclus emerges as a hero whose strength lies in his acts of devotion, his efforts to heal others, and his willingness to protect his companion through acts of loyalty and commitment rather than domination. In this way, Miller’s protagonist has destabilised the conventional relation between martial aggression and masculinity, demonstrating that the essence of heroism can be rooted in acts of nurturance and relationality rather than violent bloodshed.

Through the character of Circe, the traditional image of a passive, vulnerable and weak female figure is overturned as Circe emerges as a powerful, authoritative and intellectually alert protagonist of her narrative. Her transformation from a naive nymph to an agentic witch presents her as a warrior woman whose heroic identity is not determined by the battles she has won, but recognised by feminine agency, strategic intelligence, revenge and potential for survival. Her feminine power does not just help her to evade patriarchal values that demonise and sexualise her, but she learns to confront it, outsmart it, and then reclaim her boundaries. Her relationship with nature further advocates her image of an agentic woman, since she develops her power through cooperation and reciprocity instead of conquest.

Together, Miller’s selected fictional texts dismantle the normative structure of a warfare narrative that celebrates violence, mastery and equate them with masculine triumph. The theoretical framework deployed for this study has demonstrated that Miller’s fiction strives for a reconfiguration of masculinist narrative form by foregrounding the suppressed qualities of emotions, care, softness and receptivity as the ideals of a heroic identity. An alternative model of storytelling is constructed that relies on the acts of gathering, preserving and sustaining life rather than destroying it. This research contributes to the existing scholarship in two ways: first, it portrays that Patroclus and Circe are not just gender-reversed versions of traditional heroic narrative but Miller’s protagonists are part of a much broader spectrum evokes the rethinking of what heroism actually means. Second, it also demonstrates that feminist narrative writing can be used to reconstruct the blueprint of mythic storytelling, to include and recognise the values of vulnerability, relationality and care as forms of

power. Thus, by portraying a male figure who can nurture and a female figure who can wield power, Miller's fiction opens up a space for a fluid understanding of masculine/feminine subjectivities and agency.

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