

BOOK 10:

Circe, the Grace of the Witch



Detail of *Tilla Durieux as Circe* (about 1912–1913), Franz von Struck. Oil on paper, 53.5 cm × 46.5 cm. Private collection. Photo © akg-images.

Odysseus and his men next land on the island of Aeolus, the wind king, and stay with him a month. To extend his hospitality, Aeolus gives Odysseus two parting gifts: a fair west wind that will blow the fleet of ships toward Ithaca, and a great bag holding all the unfavorable, stormy winds. Within sight of home, and while Odysseus is sleeping, the men open the bag, thinking it contains gold and silver. The bad winds thus escape and blow the ships back to Aeolus' island. The king refuses to help them again, believing now that their voyage has been cursed by the gods.

The discouraged mariners next stop briefly in the land of the Laestrygones, fierce cannibals who bombard the fleet of ships with boulders. Only Odysseus, his ship, and its crew of 45 survive the shower of boulders. The lone ship then sails to Aea, home of the goddess Circe, who is considered by many to be a witch. There, Odysseus divides his men into two groups. Eurylochus leads one platoon to explore the island, while Odysseus stays behind on the ship with the remaining crew.

“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.

- 5 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
10 fawned on our men—who met their yellow eyes
and feared them. **Q**

In the entrance way they stayed
to listen there: inside her quiet house
they heard the goddess Circe.

- in her **beguiling** voice, while on her loom
15 she wove ambrosial fabric sheer and bright,

Low she sang

10 fawned on: showed affection for.

Q EPIC SIMILE

In lines 6–11, notice the simile involving Circe's wolves and mountain lions. What is the point of this comparison? How does it affect your impression of Circe's hall?

beguiling (bĕ-gĭ'ling) *adj.* charming; pleasing **beguile** *v.*

15 ambrosial: fit for the gods.

by that craft known to the goddesses of heaven.
No one would speak, until Polites—most
faithful and likable of my officers, said:

17 **Polites** (pə-lī'tēz).

'Dear friends, no need for stealth: here's a young weaver
20 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
25 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,
30 adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose
desire or thought of our dear father land.
Scarce had they drunk when she flew after them
with her long stick and shut them in a pigsty—
bodies, voices, heads, and bristles, all
35 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.

23–26 *If you were among this group, whom would you follow—Polites or Eurylochus? Why?*

Down to the ship Eurylochus came running
40 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
45 we heard the tale: our friends were gone. . . ."

27–36 *What happens to the men after they drink Circe's magic potion?*

foreboding (fôr-bō'dīng) *n.* a sense of approaching evil

Eurylochus tells Odysseus what has happened and begs him to sail away from Circe's island. Against this advice, however, Odysseus rushes to save his men from the enchantress. On the way, he meets the god Hermes, who gives him a magical plant called moly to protect him from Circe's power. Still, Hermes warns Odysseus that he must make the goddess swear she will play no "witches' tricks." Armed with the moly and Hermes' warning, Odysseus arrives at Circe's palace.

Circe gives Odysseus a magic drink, but it does not affect him and he threatens to kill her with his sword. Circe turns the pigs back into men but puts them all into a trance. They stay for one year, until Odysseus finally begs her to let them go home. She replies that they must first visit the land of the dead and hear a prophecy from the ghost of Tiresias.