

Circe



SUMMARY

Circe addresses the minor nature goddesses who live with her on an island, saying she rather likes pigs, though she knows not everyone does. She then lists off a number of names that are used to refer to pigs and their body parts: "the tusker," "swine" and so forth. Regardless of what you call them, Circe continues, they've all belonged to her at some point. She's dominated their tense, sweaty bodies and smelled their strong, piggy perfumes. She says that she's well acquainted with both big pigs and small ones, and with the banging, smashing chorus of sounds that they make. She describes standing outside a pigpen with a bucket of slop in the early evening, inhaling the sharp scent of their sweat, envisioning the moon as a lemon that the sky was holding in its mouth. But first, Circe says, there's a foreign recipe she wants to share with the women of the island.

The recipe uses a pig's cheeks—in fact, not just the cheek, but the tongue as well. You take the cheeks, she explains, along with the tongue, put them all in a bowl, and season it with a good amount of salt and cloves. Keep in mind what tongues are good for: licking, slurping up liquids, loosening things up, wetting things, lying in the squishy pocket of the jaw. Also keep in mind, she tells the nymphs, that however a pig might look—whether spineless or courageous, funny or grand, sneaky or knowledgeable, mean or compassionate—it's still a pig. Add a dash of mace.

After properly cleaning the ears, Circe continues, one should scald them quickly in hot water, sear them around the edges, throw them in a pot, cook them on high heat, and then put them on a plate with some herbs for decoration. Pointing out a stewing ear, Circe asks the nymphs whether they recall that ear ever paying any attention to them—listening to their pleas and poems and their lovely, bright, musical voices. Crush the potatoes, Circe says to the women; pour yourselves a drink. Next up: the brains, the legs, the shoulders, the jaws; then slice open the swollen, unprotected sack of testicles and slip out the sweet treats. Once the pig's heart has grown hard, she says, cut it up into little pieces.

Cut it up into little pieces, Circe says again. She then recounts a time when she fell to her knees on the brilliant beach, looking out to sea as huge ships seemed to emerge from the sun shining vividly at the horizon, appearing like something out of legends. She took off her clothes and walked out into the water until it rose as high as her chest; she motioned at the ships and called out to them. Then she leapt into the water and swam, chest up, while three dark ships bobbed in the water near shore. But she was just a young woman then, Circe says. This was back when she still dream of men coming to the island.

Returning to the present, she says it's time to pour juices over the crackling, roasting pigs once more.



THEMES



GENDER, POWER, AND CONTROL

"Circe" is a humorous and scathing retelling of the myth of Circe, a witch infamous for turning the men who visited her island into pigs. Circe has often been presented as a kind of femme fatale who lures unwitting men to their doom. This poem, however, shows things from *Circe's* perspective instead: these transformations, as she presents them, are essentially acts of righteous vengeance for men's selfishness and cruelty. Readers might interpret the poem's violence as a [satirical](#) reversal of men's control over and abuse of women's bodies, or they might simply take it as a grisly revenge fantasy. Regardless, in letting Circe finally speak for herself the poem illuminates the way that women's experiences have long been misrepresented or erased from the stories told about them.

Circe insists that she wasn't always this callous butcherer of pigs. She was once "young[]" and "hoping for men" to come to the island, but these visiting men took her kindness for granted. As Circe describes the pigs she's cooking, readers can sense that she's actually describing the coldness and greed of these male visitors. She [rhetorically](#) asks the "nereids and nymphs" (i.e., minor female nature deities) who live on the island with her, "did [the pigs] listen, ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes, / to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear?" These men, in other words, failed to consider their hosts or even pay them common courtesy.

Circe also reminds these women how the "tongue" can be used "to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, [and] to lie," implying that these men seduced and misled the women. And in saying the pigs should be "season[ed] with mace"—a spice whose name calls to mind both a weapon from antiquity and the modern-day pepper spray often used by women to deter attackers—the poem hints that the men used force to get what they wanted.

It didn't matter whether they were "cowardly," "brave," or "comical"; when it came to their treatment of women, Circe says that all of these men were the same. They had "piggy eyes," insinuating that they were violent, greedy animals. In a [metaphorical](#) sense, then, they were *already* pigs—Circe just revealed their true nature.

In taking control of their bodies, Circe is essentially treating the men just as they've treated women. She says, "One way or another, all pigs have been mine" and "under [her] thumb." She

also describes cutting up the different parts of the body, everything from the "brain" to "the sweetmeats slipped / from the slit, bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls."

This gruesome description suggests that she enjoys emasculating and humiliating these men, presumably as payback. In short, she's giving them a taste of their own medicine. "Circe" thus grants a typically sidelined character a chance to tell her own story; in her mind, she's not a wily enchantress so much as a disillusioned woman giving men no less than they deserve.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-37



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*I'm fond, nereids ...
... have been mine—*

Circe was a minor goddess/witch from Greek mythology with a talent for transforming people into animals. She's probably most famous for the supporting role she played in Homer's epic [The Odyssey](#), and knowing a bit about this tale will help make sense of the poem:

- *The Odyssey* tells the story of Odysseus, King of Ithaca, trying to find his way home after fighting in the Trojan War. Odysseus and his men stumble upon Aea, the island where Circe lives and which is populated by a number of "nereids and nymphs" (minor Greek nature deities who took the form of beautiful maidens).
- Circe plays a pivotal role in Odysseus's journey, although Circe herself is depicted as little more than a scheming seductress. She also infamously transforms Odysseus's men into pigs (though Odysseus convinces her to change them back).

This poem only vaguely [alludes](#) to the events of *The Odyssey*, however, diving instead into Circe's point of view.

In the first line, Circe addresses the "nereids and nymphs" of the island. Right away, the [alliteration](#) of "nereids and nymphs" elevates the poem's language; Circe's speech sounds rather epic and grand, perhaps as a nod to her tale's origins in classical mythology. It quickly becomes clear, however, that this poem isn't going to take a classical view of her story.

While there are some people who don't like "pigs," Circe continues, she's not one of them. Circe then lists off the various names people might use to refer to a pig: "the tusker, the snout, the boar, and the swine." The [anaphora](#) (the [repetition](#) of "the")

of this list adds an easy rhythm and a playful tone to the poem, as if Circe is getting a kick out of her own story. It doesn't really matter what you call them, she continues; "one way or another," Circe declares, they've all belonged to her.

Notice how the [end rhyme](#) between "swine" in line 2 and "mine" in line 3 emphasizes what Circe's saying: that she *possesses* these pigs. The poem is written in [free verse](#) (meaning it doesn't use a regular [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#)), but occasional rhymes like this one emphasize key points. This language of possession, of bodily ownership, is meant to echo the language of sexual conquest.

LINES 4-7

*under my thumb, ...
... grunts, their squeals.*

Circe goes on to say that these pigs are "under [her] thumb," the first of many [puns](#) that add to the poem's darkly playful tone:

- Being "under someone's thumb" is an [idiomatic](#) expression meaning that one is under someone else's strict control. Circe is the master of these pigs, in other words.
- But as Circe goes on to describe the "bristling, salty skin of their [the pigs'] backs," it becomes clear that the phrase can be taken quite literally as well!
- The word "bristling" is *another* subtle pun: this word can refer to both the coarse, spiky hairs that coat the pigs' backs and to the way those hairs stand on end when the pigs are angry or afraid. This implies that these pigs are terrified or indignant (or both) and that Circe is taking pleasure in her power over them.

Circe then describes the sights, sounds, and smells of the pigs, using vivid [imagery](#) that makes their physical presence practically leap off the page. These lines are thick with sonic devices, including [alliteration](#) ("bristling"/"backs"), [assonance](#) ("under"/"thumb," "bristling"/"skin," "nostrils"/"yobby"), [sibilance](#) (" bristling, salty skin"/"backs"/"nostrils") and /k/ [consonance](#) ("skin"/"backs"/"porky colonges"):

under my thumb, the bristling, salty skin of their
backs,
in my nostrils here, their yobby, porky colonges.

All this sonic richness help bring the poem's imagery to life: readers can imagine the feel of the prickly hairs on their backs and smell their aggressively piggy smells ("yobby" means rude, loud, and forceful). Those crisp /k/, bold /b/, and hissing /s/ sounds come across as vaguely sinister as well. It sounds as though Circe is savoring every syllable, and the musicality of the language perhaps reflects the pleasure Circe takes in

controlling these pigs.

Notice, too, the use of [asyndeton](#) in these lines. The absence of any coordinating conjunction between "backs" and "in my nostrils here" speeds the poem up and makes it feel more casual, again emphasizing the conversational way in which Circe is addressing the other women of the island.

The imagery in lines 6-7 is made even more effective by the use of [onomatopoeia](#): the words "oinks," "grunts," and "squeals" all imitate the very sounds they are describing. In this way, the reader doesn't have to wonder what this "percussion" might sound like: they're already hearing it, as though standing right there with Circe.

Finally, the [ironic](#) use of the word "colognes" to refer to the pigs' stench reminds readers that these pigs used to be *men*. And readers might get the sense, already, that Circe's descriptions of the animals might apply to their human forms as well—that is, perhaps these men were perhaps rough-skinned, salty with sweat, smelly, and raucously loud *before* their transformation.

LINES 7-10

*I've stood with ...
... of the sky.*

Circe says that she's stood outside the pigpen towards the end of the day, carrying a bucket of "swill" (or scraps for the pigs) and "tasting the sweaty, spicy air." The air is filled with the frightened pigs' stench, but the word "spicy" also hints at Circe's plans for the pigs (i.e., to cook and eat them).

Listen to how the /s/ [alliteration/sibilance](#) in these lines evokes a rather ominous silence:

[...] I've stood with a pail of swill
at dusk, at the creaky gate of the sty,
tasting the sweaty, spicy air [...]

The hush of all these /s/ sounds contrasts with the "oinks" and "grunts" from a moment before; it's as though the pigs have fallen quiet in Circe's presence, terrified of what she will do.

Circe then compares "the moon" to "a lemon popped in the mouth of the sky." This [simile](#) seems a little whimsical at first, treating the moon like a sour candy being munched on by a [personified](#), child-like sky. It might make readers think of a roasted pig roasted with a fruit stuck in its mouth. As with the mention of "spicy" air, the lemon-moon image hints at Circe's sinister plans for these pigs who were not so long ago men.

LINES 11-15

*But I want ...
... and cloves.*

The first stanza creates the inkling suspicion that Circe has food on her mind while describing her pigs. Now, that suspicion

proves true as Circe declares that she wants "to begin with a recipe from abroad."

Notice the way /b/ [consonance](#) seems to break through the hush of all those prior /s/ sounds. The bouncy /b/ sounds infuse the poem with new life, carrying the reader into the second stanza where Circe will elaborate on this "recipe."

This recipe, Circe says, "uses the cheek—and the tongue in cheek / at that." This marks another [pun](#): "Tongue in cheek" is an [idiom](#) used to refer to something that's sarcastic or flippant, but Circe is also *literally* describing the parts of the animal she's planning to cook: the cheek and the tongue that literally sits "in," or inside of, that cheek. Again, Circe seems to be having fun with her language, suggesting that she feels no remorse about cooking these men-turned-pigs. The poem's playful language might suggest that the reader shouldn't take to take any of this too seriously, either.

Circe says that in order to make this particular recipe, one should "Lay two pig's cheeks, with the tongue, / in a dish, and strew it well over with salt / and cloves." This cooking-related [imagery](#) isn't random; it [alludes](#) to the mythology surrounding Circe, which has traditionally linked the enchantress with deep knowledge of herbs and plants. In fact, in some myths, she transformed men into animals by lacing their drinks with potions crafted from her gardens.

In this way, the poem subtly elevates something traditionally viewed as a woman's task (cooking) into a representation of Circe's power.

LINES 15-17

*Remember the skills ...
... of the face—*

Circe tells the "nereids and nymphs" of the island to "Remember the skills of the tongue" and then lists out various things that a tongue can be used for:

to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie
in the soft pouch of the face—

The /l/ [alliteration](#) here is liquid and limber, the sounds of the list evoking all the activities Circe is describing. [Anaphora](#), meanwhile (the [repetition](#) of "to" highlighted above), adds a sense of building, repetitive rhythm to this list. Readers might get the sense that Circe could go on and on enumerating the tongue's various "skills."

Those activities, in turn, all sound a lot like double entendres. That is, each action here might refer to consumption (eating/drinking) or seduction/sex.

The final item in this list ("to lie") is another explicit [pun](#): literally, a pig's tongue that is resting "in the soft pouch of the face." But this phrase also suggests that the men-turned-pigs misled to the women of the island, saying whatever they needed to say to

get what they wanted. This pun highlights the consequences of the men's actions: their tongues *lied* to the women, and now those tongues are *lying* there and about to be eaten.

The poem also again uses [asyndeton](#), omitting a coordinating conjunction (in this case, an "and") in between "lubricate" and "to lie." This gives the passage speed and momentum as Circe lists off these "skills" that culminate in an important detail: the men's dishonesty. And at this point in the poem, it's starting to become clear that Circe didn't turn these men into pigs on a whim. The poem implies that she was provoked by their mistreatment of her and the other "nereids and nymphs."

LINES 17-20

*and how each ...
... Season with mace.*

The mention of the pigs' tongues resting "in the soft pouch of the face" prompts Circe to describe the pigs' faces themselves. These range from "the cowardly," to "the brave, the comical, noble / sly or wise" to "the cruel, the kind." Again, readers get the sense that Circe is actually talking about the men that these pigs used to be.

Circe's enumeration of different kinds of "faces" again features [anaphora](#) (the repetition of "the") and [asyndeton](#) (the lack of coordinating conjunction between "the cruel" and "the kind"). These devices both add to the poem's momentum as Circe lists every possible thing she can remember. It's almost as if, finally given the opportunity to narrate her own story, she doesn't want to overlook a single detail!

Note, too, how [diacope](#) emphasizes the word "face" in these lines:

in the soft pouch of the **face**—and how each pig's **face**
the cowardly **face**, the brave, the comical, noble

"Face," of course, describes the *literal* front of a person or animal's head, but it can also refer to the *surface* of something (i.e., to a disguise or a facade, as in the phrase "on the face of things"). This word might subtly suggest that these men *pretended* to be something they weren't in order to seduce the women. Regardless of how they might have seemed on the *surface*, they all had "piggy eyes"; they were greedy and inconsiderate of the women's feelings and desires.

Circe then tells her listeners to "Season" the cooking pigs "with mace"—another word with multiple meanings:

- "Mace" can refer to a fragrant spice or to a club-like weapon. Nowadays, "mace" is perhaps best known for being a self-defense spray; many women carry it in order to protect themselves from potential attackers.
- Circe is saying to literally sprinkle the spice known as mace over the pigs, but she's also [punning](#) on the

idea of dousing a man with pepper spray!

- The mention of "mace" might even suggest that the men didn't just seduce the women with lies; they may have used *force* to get what they wanted.

This pun again suggests that Circe's cooking is an act of revenge, a way of asserting her power over men who have wronged her and the other women on the island.

LINES 21-25

*Well-cleaned pig's ears ...
... singing and clear?*

In the third stanza, Circe gives instructions on how to cook "pig's ears." Once they've been thoroughly "cleaned," she says, they "should be blanched" (or briefly boiled), "singed" (burned slightly around the edges), and then "tossed / in a pot, boiled, kept hot, scraped, served, garnished / with thyme."

Yet again, the poem uses [asyndeton](#) as Circe lists out various pig-preparation steps: the omission of a coordinating conjunction between "served" and "garnished" speeds things up and emphasizes Circe's casual tone. She's an expert at cooking pigs and totally nonchalant about eating creatures that used to be men.

Notice, too, how harsh some of the words/sounds in this list are. The sharp /k/ and /t/ sounds; rustling /sh/ and /s/ sounds; and plosive /p/ sounds evoke the sizzling hiss and pop of cooking; one can hear (and maybe even feel) flesh being "singed," "boiled," and "scraped":

[...] singed, tossed
in a pot, boiled, kept hot, scraped, served, garnished

This [cacophony](#), or string of unpleasant sounds, suggests Circe's vengeful violence.

Circe then tells the other women to "Look at that simmering lug" (slang for ear)—yet another [pun](#)!

- "Simmering" is a cooking term used to describe water that is just barely boiling, but it also can be used to describe barely concealed anger or indignation.
- The poem is suggesting, perhaps, that Circe's power over these men must be infuriating to them, after countless centuries of men having the upper hand over women like her and the island nymphs.

Circe then poses a [rhetorical question](#) to the "nereids and nymphs," asking if the men/pigs

listen[ed], ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes,
to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear?

The question isn't meant to elicit a response; both Circe and the nymphs know that the men *didn't* listen to them, the poem implies, and that they were too self-absorbed to care about what the women wanted or needed. But by posing the question, Circe invites the reader into this knowledge, making her motives for transforming the men into pigs crystal clear.

Finally, notice all the [assonance](#) and [rhyme](#) throughout these lines: short /aw/ assonance in "tossed," "pot," and "hot," the full rhyme between "pot" and "hot," and the rhyme between "thyme," "rhymes," and "chimes." All of this musicality adds to Circe's exuberant tone—again, readers get the sense that she's having wicked fun here. The rhymes might also echo the beauty of the women's "singing—a beauty the men ignored. The word "prayers" even suggests that these women pleaded with the men to act differently, to consider their feelings, but even those pleas went unheard.

LINES 25-30

*Mash ...
... Dice it small.*

Lines 25-26 [juxtapose](#) the sweet "singing" of the nymphs and Circe's instruction to "Mash / the potatoes" and "open the beer." The juxtaposition highlights the fact that these women have changed, are harder and more brutal now than they were when the men first arrived. In a way, they seem to have become more like those men!

Circe continues to describe her methods for preparing the pigs throughout the rest of the third stanza. She lists off the other parts of the pig that need to be cooked: "the brains, the trotters" (or legs/hooves), "shoulders, chops" and finally "the sweetmeats slipped / from the slit, bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls." [Asyndeton](#)—the lack of coordinating conjunction between "chops" and "to the sweetmeats"—keeps the reader from slowing down, so they arrive at this shocking [imagery](#) quickly and without warning.

[Alliteration](#) and [assonance](#) make this passage come to life. The smooth /l/ and /s/ sounds and short, swift /ih/ sounds of "sweetmeats slipped from the slit" are evocative of the delicate task being described. And a combination of bold /b/ alliteration/[consonance](#), liquid /l/ consonance, and guttural /ul/ assonance/consonance drives home the climactic imagery of the nymphs removing the contents of the "bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls." This line suggests the complete and total humiliation/emasculatation of these men.

Circe then says that "When the heart of a pig has hardened," one should "dice it small." The [slant rhyme](#) between "heart" and "hardened" emphasizes that this violent act is a punishment for the men's brutality. That is, these lines imply that the men were cold and cruel towards the women, who are now chopping up their hard hearts in *revenge*.

The final stanza then begins with [anadiplosis](#) as Circe repeats

the phrase, "Dice it small." The [repetition](#) lends emphasis as the reader moves toward the poem's conclusion.

LINES 30-35

*I, too, once ...
... the shallow waves.*

Circe's [tone](#) shifts as she recalls having "knelt on this shining shore / watching the tall ships sail from the burning sun." This scene [alludes](#) to the arrival of Odysseus and his men on the island of Aeaëa, but the poem doesn't name them directly. Instead, it focuses on Circe's initial reaction to these ships seeming to emerge from the horizon.

Circe compares the ships and their arrival to "myths." This [simile](#) might suggest that the stories of the men's greatness preceded them; perhaps Circe was excited to meet these heroes who had fought in the Trojan War and made names for themselves. It's also possible that Circe didn't know exactly whom the ships belonged to but was thrilled by the prospect of the epic, grand, noble adventure that their arrival signaled.

Circe says that she "slipped off [her] dress to wade, / breast-deep, in the sea, waving and calling." She wanted to meet them and was trying to get their attention. She describes "plung[ing]" into the sea and "sw[imming]" out to them, and "looking up / as three black ships sighed in the shallow waves."

The [personification](#) of the ships "sigh[ing]" suggests the relief the men felt upon discovering a hospitable place to stay. The [imagery](#) is simple and straightforward, even idyllic. This suggests that when the men first came to Aeaëa, Circe was a very different woman—kind, welcoming, earnest, and innocent.

Listen, too, to all the [sibilant](#) words in this passage: "shining shore," "ships sail," "sun," "slipped," "sea," "swam," "sighed," "shallow," etc. The gentle sounds of these lines evoke the beauty and calm of the sea and the trusting nature of Circe as she invited these men into her home.

This smooth, beautiful passage also hints at the veneer of "myth" itself—at the way people can *appear* beautiful and heroic from far away but be quite terrible up close. These men may have seemed mythical when their ships dotted the horizon, but the women got a look at their true, pig-like selves when they made it to land.

LINES 36-37

*Of course, I ...
... spit once again.*

Circe abruptly ends the gentle, lyrical passage with a close dose of reality: she was a very different person when she eagerly waded into the water to welcome the mythical ships to shore. She was "younger," she says, and "hoping for men." Instead, the poem implies, she got ([metaphorical](#)) pigs: crude, callous men who promptly cured Circe of both her youthful naivety and her desire for male companionship. The reader can now

understand Circe's actions (even if they don't necessarily condone them), as it's clear that the men's cruelty is what turned her into the pig-cooker that she is now.

Circe then leaves this memory behind and returns to the present in the poem's final moments. "Now," she says, seeming to shake off the brief reverie of that simpler, more hopeful time. And she closes things out with a call to return to the task at hand: "let us baste that sizzling pig on the spit once again."

Sonic devices once again bring the poem's [imagery](#) to life. Listen to the hissing /s/, buzzing /z/, percussive /p/, and short /ih/ sounds, which evoke the crackling "sizzling" of that pig "on the spit" (a rod used to cook meat over a flame):

let us baste that sizzling pig on the spit once again.

Also notice the [rhyme](#) between "then," "men," and "again" in these final lines, which ends things on a firm, emphatic note. Whatever happened in the past, these final lines suggest, this is who Circe is *now*: a cooker and eater of men-turned-pigs.

The poem thus doesn't deny that Circe is a scheming, villainous figure; instead, it suggests that her reasons for being so are far more nuanced than the old stories ever gave her credit for. Circe's narrative shows just how different women's stories can be when women themselves get the chance to tell them.



SYMBOLS



COOKING THE PIGS

In cooking these pigs, Circe is taking her revenge (or, perhaps in her mind, doling out justice) for men's mistreatment of the women of the island. Her dominance over the pigs represents a [symbolic](#) reversal of the control men have traditionally held over women's bodies (and narratives) throughout history.

The poem links the pigs' various body parts with the various ways that the men mistreated women on the island. Cooking their tongues, for example, seems to represent payback for the men's dishonest seduction tactics. Likewise, searing the pigs' ears is revenge for all the times these men failed to listen to the island's women, while dicing up the pigs' hardened hearts is revenge for the men's general cruelty and callousness.

Most strikingly, Circe instructs her nymphs to slice open the pigs' "bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls" and pull out "the sweetmeats" inside. In other words, she tells the island's women to remove the pigs' testicles. This represents the ultimate act of emasculation; Circe is robbing these men-turned-pigs of their manhood itself (and insulting it in the same breath—deeming it both vulgar and fragile!).

The poem suggests that the men *already* abandoned that manhood in acting like "pigs," meaning that Circe's actions

suggest a symbolic reveal of who the men have *always* been. That she cooks and eats these "sweetmeats" further represents her ultimate power over the men—and, perhaps, her own problematic turn towards masculine violence in pursuit of that power.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-17:** "Lay two pig's cheeks, with the tongue, / in a dish, and strew it well over with salt / and cloves. Remember the skills of the tongue— / to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie / in the soft pouch of the face"
- **Lines 21-25:** "Well-cleaned pig's ears should be blanched, singed, tossed / in a pot, boiled, kept hot, scraped, served, garnished / with thyme. Look at that simmering lug, at that ear, / did it listen, ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes, / to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear?"
- **Lines 27-30:** "to the sweetmeats slipped / from the slit, bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls. / When the heart of a pig has hardened, dice it small. / Dice it small!"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem very clearly [alludes](#) to the mythology surrounding Circe, an goddess/enchantress most famous for her appearance in Homer's [Odyssey](#).

The Odyssey tells the story of Odysseus, King of Ithaca, who is trying to return home by sea after fighting in the Trojan War. In his travels, he and his men come upon Aeaea, the island where Circe lives with various "nereids and nymphs" (minor Greek nature deities who took the form of beautiful young women).

In Homer's tale, Circe turns Odysseus's men into pigs and then tries to seduce Odysseus to the same end. Odysseus, however, having been warned by Hermes (messenger of the gods), doesn't fall for Circe's tricks and compels her to turn his men back into human beings. After this, Circe and Odysseus become lovers, and Circe bears Odysseus two sons. She then offers him valuable advice that allows him and his men to sail safely home.

The end of this poem alludes to the arrival of Odysseus and his men on Aeaea, but the poem doesn't name them outright. After all, this is a reimagining of the classic myth, and in this version, Circe's story is the one that matters. Rather than being a small, supporting character in the male hero's journey, this Circe is at the center of her own narrative.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I'm fond, nereids and nymphs, unlike some, of the pig, / of the tusker, the snout, the boar and the swine."

- **Lines 30-36:** "I, too, once knelt on this shining shore / watching the tall ships sail from the burning sun / like myths; slipped off my dress to wade, / breast-deep, in the sea, waving and calling; / then plunged, then swam on my back, looking up / as three black ships sighed in the shallow waves. / Of course, I was younger then. And hoping for men."

ALLITERATION

An abundance of [alliteration](#) adds musicality, rhythm, and intensity to the poem. This starts from the very first line, with the alliteration of "nereids and nymphs" making Circe's story sound like an epic tale.

Much of the alliteration in the poem specifically repeats the /s/ sound—"snout" and "swine" in line 2, for example, and "salty skin" in line 4. And listen to lines 7-10:

and grunts, their squeals. I've stood with a pail of
swill
at dusk, at the creaky gate of the sty,
tasting the sweaty, spicy air, the moon
like a lemon popped in the mouth of the sky.

These lines are filled with more general [sibilance](#) as well—the /s/ sounds in "grunts," "dusk," "tasting," "spicy," etc. All this sibilance adds a sinister hush to the poem and subtly calls to mind the squeaking "squeals" being described.

Alliteration often brings the poem's [imagery](#) to life. Take line 16, where a long string of loose, liquid /l/ alliteration evokes the men's slobbering seduction:

to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie

These /l/ sounds suggest the very "lick[ing]" and "lap[ping]" that the speaker is describing. They also intensify the line's language and make this list, with its implication that the men took advantage of the women sexually, stand out in the poem.

There's another string of intense alliteration in lines 27-29, which again calls readers' attention to a striking image:

to the trotters, shoulders, chops, to the sweetmeats
slipped
from the slit, bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls.
When the heart of a pig has hardened, dice it small.

There's [assonance](#) here too ("sweetmeats," "slipped"/"slit," "bulging, vulnerable," "heart"/"hardened") and lots of [consonance](#) (for example: "bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls. / When the Heart of a pig has hardened, dice it small"). Overall, the passage is thick with slippery /s/ and /l/ sounds that call to mind the delicate yet messy task of removing the "sweetmeats"

from the "bag" of the pigs' testicles. The bold /b/ sounds, meanwhile, add an almost comical bluntness to this grotesque image.

More sibilance dominates the final stanza of the poem. Take a look at the /s/ and /sh/ alliteration in lines 30-32:

[...] I, too, once knelt on this shining shore
watching the tall ships sail from the burning sun
like myths; slipped off my dress to wade,

These soft sounds cast a gentle hush over the poem as the speaker reminisces about a time when she was tender and "hop[eful]" instead of cold and callous.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "nereids," "nymphs"
- **Line 2:** "snout," "swine"
- **Line 4:** "bristling," "salty," "skin," "backs"
- **Line 7:** "squeals," "stood," "swill"
- **Line 8:** "sty"
- **Line 9:** "sweaty," "spicy," "moon"
- **Line 10:** "mouth," "sky"
- **Line 16:** "lick," "lap," "loosen," "lubricate," "lie"
- **Line 17:** "pouch," "pig's"
- **Line 18:** "cowardly," "comical"
- **Line 19:** "cruel," "kind"
- **Line 22:** "scraped," "served"
- **Line 23:** "lug"
- **Line 24:** "listen"
- **Line 26:** "beer," "brains"
- **Line 27:** "sweetmeats," "slipped"
- **Line 28:** "slit," "bulging," "bag," "balls"
- **Line 29:** "heart," "hardened"
- **Line 30:** "shining," "shore"
- **Line 31:** "ships," "sail," "sun"
- **Line 32:** "slipped"
- **Line 33:** "sea"
- **Line 34:** "swam"
- **Line 35:** "ships," "sighed," "shallow"
- **Line 37:** "sizzling," "spit"

ASSONANCE

In addition to [alliteration](#), the poem uses quite a bit of [assonance](#). These repeated vowel sounds likewise make the poem's language more intense and musical. Listen, for example, to how the insistent /aw/ sounds of "tossed / in a pot, boiled, kept hot" add a sing-song rhythm to the line. And the intensely repetitive of sounds in 27-28 suggest Circe savoring every syllable, in turn reflecting the relish she takes in emasculating these men/pigs:

to the trotters, shoulders, chops, to the sweetmeats

slipped
from the slit, bulging, vulnerable [...]

Assonance overlaps with [consonance](#) here and elsewhere, making the poem's language even more memorable. For instance, in lines 4-6, short /uh/, /ih/, and /aw/ sounds combine with sharp /k/ and hissing /s/ sounds. The lines themselves crackle and hiss with intensity, the force of Circe's language mirroring the pigs' noisiness:

under my thumb, the bristling, salty skin of their
backs,
in my nostrils here, their yobby, porky colognes.
I'm familiar with the hogs and runts, their percussion
of oinks

Other times, assonance works on its own, such as the /ay/ sounds in line 18 ("face" and "brave") and the /eye/ sounds in lines 19-20 ("kind" and "eyes"). In these two examples, the assonance isn't particularly intense but is just noticeable enough to draw attention to the qualities these men *should* have possessed—"brave[ry]" and "kind[ness]"—as opposed to the "piggy" behavior that landed them in this mess.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "under," "thumb," "bristling," "skin"
- **Line 5:** "nostrils," "yobby"
- **Line 6:** "hogs," "runts," "percussion"
- **Line 7:** "grunts"
- **Line 8:** "dusk," "gate," "sty"
- **Line 9:** "tasting," "spicy"
- **Line 10:** "sky"
- **Line 16:** "loosen," "lubricate"
- **Line 18:** "face," "brave"
- **Line 19:** "kind"
- **Line 20:** "eyes"
- **Line 21:** "tossed"
- **Line 22:** "pot," "hot"
- **Line 23:** "thyme"
- **Line 24:** "rhymes"
- **Line 25:** "chimes," "clear"
- **Line 26:** "beer"
- **Line 27:** "trotters," "chops," "sweetmeats," "slipped"
- **Line 28:** "slit," "bulging," "vulnerable"
- **Line 29:** "heart," "hardened"
- **Line 32:** "myths," "slipped"
- **Line 33:** "deep," "sea"
- **Line 34:** "back"
- **Line 35:** "black"
- **Line 36:** "then," "men"
- **Line 37:** "pig," "spit," "again"

IMAGERY

Evocative [imagery](#) plants the reader firmly in Circe's world, bringing her pig butchering to vivid and often uncomfortable life on the page.

The poem's imagery appeals to all the senses. In the first stanza, for instance, Circe describes "the bristling, salty skin of [the pigs'] backs" and the smell of "their yobby, porky, colognes." Readers can sense the briny, sweaty stench of these terrified pigs and feel their tensed, spiky-haired backs. Circe then mentions "their percussion of oinks / and grunts, their squeals," allowing the reader to also *hear* the pigs as though standing right there "at the creaky gate of the sty" (or pig pen) alongside Circe. Circe then says that when she goes out to feed the pigs, she can practically "tast[e] the sweaty, spicy air." This description suggests that the air is thick with the pigs' fear.

The poem uses a lot of cooking-related imagery as well, as in lines 21-15:

Well-cleaned pigs ears should be blanched, singed,
tossed
in a pot, boiled, kept hot, scraped, served, garnished
with thyme. [...]

This list of cooking methods is meant to evoke pain and discomfort; the reader can perhaps imagine the horror these men-turned-pigs would feel at seeing their fellow man-pigs "boiled" and "scraped." The language is rough, abrasive, suggesting the callousness with which Circe deals with these rude and rowdy, "piggy" men.

In contrast, most of the imagery in the final stanza of the poem is gentle and relaxed. The anger and violence that infuse the first three stanzas disappear for a moment as Circe remembers "watching the tall ships" come in "like myths," and "slipp[ing] off [her] dress to wade, breast-deep, in the sea." This imagery is calm, peaceful: "three black ships sighed in the shallow waves."

But in the poem's final moments, the imagery darkens once again. After recalling what happened when these "men" actually stepped foot on her island, Circe returns to her vengeful cooking: "Now, / let us baste that sizzling pig on the spit once again." The language here is itself "spit[ting]" with rage; readers can practically hear the meat crackling and sizzling.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-5
- Lines 6-10
- Lines 13-15
- Lines 16-17
- Lines 21-23
- Line 25
- Lines 27-28
- Lines 30-35

- Line 37

SIMILE

The poem includes two [similes](#) that help bring Circe's world to life.

The first simile appears in lines 9-10, toward the end of the first stanza. Circe says that as she's "tasting the sweaty, spicy air" outside the pigpen, she looks up and sees

[...] the moon /
like a lemon popped in the mouth of the sky.

Circe subtly [personifies](#) the sky here, envisioning it sucking on the yellow crescent of the moon as though it were a slice of lemon. Coming on the heels of her mention of "sweat, spicy air," the simile grants readers a glimpse into Circe's mind: in imagining the sky as a "mouth" stuffed with a "lemon," Circe hints that she's about to cook these pigs. The simile might prompt readers to envision the classic image of a roasted pig, served whole with an apple or other fruit in its mouth.

There's another simile in the last stanza as Circe describes the day the men first arrived on her island:

[...] I, too, once knelt on this shining shore
watching the tall ships sail from the burning sun
like myths; [...]

These lines are actually an [allusion](#) to the arrival of the legendary Greek hero Odysseus and his men, who landed on Circe's island while trying to find their way home after the Trojan War. The simile reminds the reader of the "myths" this poem is alluding to without actually spelling them out. It also subtly suggests the way that people and stories can look very different depending on one's perspective. From a distance, the ships emanate glory and power—just as, viewed through the [metaphorical](#) lens of time/history/myth, these men look like legendary heroes. But as the ships come closer and the men arrive on the island, they prove themselves to be greedy and selfish rather than heroic; the "myths" give way to a very different reality.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "the moon / like a lemon popped in the mouth of the sky."
- **Lines 31-32:** "watching the tall ships sail from the burning sun / like myths;"

PUN

The poem is filled with [puns](#) that add both humor and ambiguity to the poem. In line 4, for example, Circe says that the men

she's turned to pigs are "under [her] thumb." This phrase works both literally (Circe is cooking these pigs and therefore touching their backs) and as an [idiom](#), as the phrase "under [one's] thumb" is commonly used to mean under one's control. This points to the fact that Circe isn't just cooking these pigs out of spite; she's doing so as a means of asserting her power over men who mistreated her.

In lines 11-13, Circe says:

But I want to begin with a recipe from abroad
which uses the cheek—and the **tongue in cheek**
at that. [...]

Once again, the phrase "tongue in cheek" has two meanings here: literally, Circe is saying that the recipe calls for both the pig's tongue and its cheeks. However, the idiom "tongue in cheek" refers to something that's insincere or [ironic](#). This playful pun suggests not only that Circe is having fun with cooking these man-pigs, but also that the poem itself is rather tongue-in-cheek—it isn't meant to be taken entirely seriously!

In lines 15-17, Circe tells the other women of the island to "Remember the skills of the tongue." She then enumerates these "skills," saying that the "tongue" is used

to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, **to lie**
in the soft pouch of the face.

Circe is punning on the two meanings of the verb "to lie," which can signify that something is at rest (i.e., the tongue literally is lying within "the soft pouch of the face") and can also refer to the act of saying something that isn't true. The enjambment after "lie" emphasizes these two possible meanings and suggests that the men-turned-pigs misled the women of the island.

A later pun further hints that the men weren't exactly on their best behavior on the island: in line 20, Circe tells the "nereids and nymphs" to "Season" the cooking pigs "with mace." Mace refers to a spice, a weapon from antiquity, and, in contemporary times, a spray to ward off attackers; it's often associated specifically with women deterring would-be assailants. This phrase can thus be taken literally or humorously—or even rather ominously, as it might imply the men took the women by force.

Lines 4 and 23 use rather subtle puns. In line 4, Circe describes the "bristling, salty skin of [the pigs'] backs." The word "bristling" suggests the rough, coarse hairs that grow on pigs' backs, but it also can describe something drawing itself up angrily or in fear, implying that these pigs are infuriated and/or terrified by the control Circe has over them. Likewise, in line 23, Circe tells the "nereids and nymphs" to "Look at that simmering lug" (or ear). Here, the word "simmering" also has two meanings. One describes lightly boiling water, and

therefore makes sense within the context of all this cooking [imagery](#); the other describes suppressed rage or fury. In other words, the poem is once again implying that these men are indignant about what is happening to them, which of course only further delights a vengeful Circe.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “under my thumb,” “the bristling, salty skin of their backs,”
- **Lines 11-13:** “But I want to begin with a recipe from abroad / which uses the cheek—and the tongue in cheek / at that.”
- **Lines 16-17:** “to lie / in the soft pouch of the face”
- **Line 20:** “Season with mace.”
- **Line 23:** “Look at that simmering lug,”

ANAPHORA

The poem is brimming with [parallelism](#) (as well as the more specific device [anaphora](#)), which creates a steady, insistent rhythm and also emphasizes certain words and phrases. This parallelism is often the result of enumeration—a rhetorical device in which details are presented in a list form. This happens in line 2 of the poem, for example, when Circe provides a variety of names for pigs:

[...] of the pig,
of the tusker, the snout, the boar and the swine.

Here, the repetition of “of the”/“the” provides a consistent rhythm as Circe casually rattles off all these different pig names. It doesn’t *matter* what one calls them, the repetition suggests; they’re all still pigs, and they all “have been” Circe’s.

The poem uses more anaphora in lines 4-7 with the repetition of “their” (“**their** backs [...] **their** yobby, porky colognes,” etc.) and in line 8 with the repetition of “at” (“**at** dusk, **at** the creaky gate”). Again, all this parallelism adds rhythm and structure to the poem. Readers might also get the sense, from this insistent repetition, that this process is intimately familiar to Circe.

The parallelism/anaphora in the next two stanzas works similarly. In line 16, for instance, the repetitive structure adds a sense of building intensity as Circe describes all the different “skills of the tongue”:

to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie

Readers get the sense of just how *many* ways these men/pigs have irked Circe. And in lines 18-19, the parallelism again implies that all men/pigs are the same:

the cowardly face, the brave, the comical, noble
sly or wise, the cruel, the kind [...]

It essentially doesn’t matter what word follows “the”; however their faces might look, Circe says, they all have “piggy eyes”:

In all these examples, the use of parallel structures adds intensity to Circe’s language:

[...] Look at **that** simmering lug, **at that** ear,
did it listen, ever, **to you**, to your prayers and rhymes,
to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear? Mash
[...] Now **to the** brains,
to the trotters, shoulders, chops, **to the** sweetmeats
slipped

Her commands sound increasingly forceful, the repetitive language evoking just how fed up she is with these men.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “of the pig, / of the tusker, the snout, the boar and the swine.”
- **Line 5:** “their yobby, porky colognes.”
- **Lines 6-7:** “their percussion of oinks / and grunts, their squeals”
- **Line 8:** “at dusk, at the creaky gate of the sty”
- **Line 16:** “to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie”
- **Lines 18-19:** “the cowardly face, the brave, the comical, noble / sly or wise, the cruel, the kind”
- **Line 23:** “Look at that simmering lug, at that ear”
- **Line 24:** “to you, to your prayers”
- **Line 25:** “to the chimes of your voice”
- **Lines 26-27:** “Now to the brains, / to the trotters”
- **Line 27:** “to the sweetmeats”
- **Line 34:** “then plunged, then swam on my back”

ASYNDETON

“Circe” is filled with [asyndeton](#), which adds to the rhythms and momentum of the poem. This device often overlaps with the poem’s use of [parallelism](#) and [anaphora](#); its many lists roll fluidly down the page, evoking Circe’s familiarity with her subject. The cruelty of men, the poem’s language mages clear, is nothing new to her.

Listen to the asyndeton in lines 4-5, for example:

under my thumb, the bristling, salty skin of their
backs,
in my nostrils here, their yobby, porky colognes.

Grammatically speaking, there should be a conjunction— an “and” in this case—between these two lines. The omission of any coordinating conjunction speeds the poem up, and also adds to the conversational tone of the poem as Circe rattles off lists of details.

Later, in lines 18-19, Circe describes the various expressions of

the men she turned to pigs:

the cowardly face, the brave, the comical, noble
sly or wise, the cruel, the kind, [...]

Here, asyndeton highlights that these supposed differences between the men's "faces" don't really matter because, in the end, they all behaved "pigg[ishly]" with the women of the island. Asyndeton makes it sound as though Circe's list could go on and on endlessly; she could name any number of qualities and nothing would change.

Asyndeton in lines 26-28 also contributes to the surprise of the [imagery](#) in line 28, as the poem gives no indication that Circe's description is going to turn so suddenly gruesome:

[...] Now to the brains,
to the trotters, shoulders, chops, to the sweetmeats
slipped
from the slit, bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls.

While a coordinating conjunction between "chops" and "to" might have signaled that this list was amounting to something, arriving somewhere, therefore giving the reader a heads up that something was about to happen, asyndeton has the opposite effect. The reader is suddenly plunged into a quite horrific image without any warning.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "under my thumb, the bristling, salty skin of their backs, / in my nostrils here, their yobby, porky colognes."
- **Lines 6-7:** "I'm familiar with the hogs and runts, their percussion of oinks / and grunts, their squeals."
- **Lines 7-10:** "I've stood with a pail of swill / at dusk, at the creaky gate of the sty, / tasting the sweaty, spicy air, the moon / like a lemon popped in the mouth of the sky."
- **Lines 16-17:** "to lick, to lap, to loosen, lubricate, to lie / in the soft pouch of the face"
- **Lines 18-19:** "the cowardly face, the brave, the comical, noble / sly or wise, the cruel, the kind,"
- **Lines 21-23:** "Well-cleaned pig's ears should be blanched, singed, tossed / in a pot, boiled, kept hot, scraped, served, garnished / with thyme."
- **Lines 23-25:** "Look at that simmering lug, at that ear, / did it listen, ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes, / to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear?"
- **Lines 26-28:** "Now to the brains, / to the trotters, shoulders, chops, to the sweetmeats slipped / from the slit, bulging, vulnerable bag of the balls."

ONOMATOPOEIA

The poem uses [onomatopoeia](#) in lines 6-7 to evoke the sounds

of a pig pen full of pigs:

I'm familiar with the hogs and runts, their percussion
of oinks
and grunts, their squeals. [...]

The words "oinks," "grunts," and "squeals" all essentially *make* the sounds they are describing. The word "percussion" adds to the effect, with its "percussive" /p/ and /k/ sounds and squealing /s/ sounds. As such, it's easy for the reader to hear what Circe is hearing. In this way, onomatopoeia makes the poem's [imagery](#) all the more striking and effective; the reader doesn't have to stop and imagine what this "percussion" sounds like, because the poem has woven that information into the sound of the language itself!

And of course, because Circe is describing pigs that were once men, the reader will associate these piggish sounds with the greedy men who originally came to Circe's island. Even *before* they were transformed into literal pigs, the poem implies, these men were loud and obnoxious, "grunt[ing]" and "squeal[ing]" like beasts.

Where Onomatopoeia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "percussion of oinks / and grunts, their squeals."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

In the third stanza, Circe asks herself and/or the "nereids and nymphs" a [rhetorical question](#). This question suggests men's cruelty when they first came to the island:

[...] Look at that simmering lug, at that ear,
did it listen, ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes,
to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear?

The wording of the question implies that the answer to it is *no*: the men *didn't* listen to the women, not "ever." By separating the word "ever" with commas (as opposed to saying "did it ever listen"), the poem emphasizes the complete and utter lack of regard these men had for the women of the island.

The question implies that Circe hasn't always been this cruel, callous butcherer of men and pigs; she became one in *response* to the men's mistreatment. It suggests that, to the men, these women were disposable—they didn't see or appreciate the beauty of their "rhymes" and "singing," and moreover, they ignored the women's "prayers." This word, "prayers," might suggest that the women pleaded with the men to behave differently, thus implying that the men were not simply inconsiderate, but downright brutish.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-25:** "Look at that simmering lug, at that ear, / did it listen, ever, to you, to your prayers and rhymes, / to the chimes of your voice, singing and clear?"

REPETITION

The poem uses quite a bit of [repetition](#) (in addition to its previously discussed [parallelism](#) and [anaphora](#)).

Most of this is best characterized as [diacope](#), as in lines 12-15:

which uses the **cheek**—the **tongue in cheek**
at that. Lay two pig's **cheeks**, with the **tongue**,
in a dish, and strew it well over with salt
and cloves. Remember the skills of the **tongue**—

On the one hand, this diacope simply adds to the scene's gruesome [imagery](#): Circe is reducing these man-pigs to their different body parts, utterly dehumanizing them. The insistent repetition of "cheek" and "tongue" also emphasizes all the different ways that these words are being used. Circe is *literally* describing the different parts of a pig's body, but she's also playfully punning on the [idiom](#) "tongue in cheek," a phrase that refers to something said with a healthy dose of sarcasm or [irony](#). She's clearly having a bit of sinister fun here.

Diacope pops up again in lines 17-18:

in the soft pouch of the **face**—and how each pig's **face**
the cowardly **face**,

The repetition of the word "face" calls attention to all the different faces that these man-pigs might have—and to the fact that, at the end of the day, those differences don't matter; they're all still pigs (to Circe, at least).

The poem also uses [anadiplosis](#) in lines 29-30 with the repetition of the phrase "Dice it small." The first time Circe uses the phrase, she is describing the "hardened [hearts]" of pigs. But when she repeats it at the beginning of the following stanza, it feels more reflective, almost as if she's describing what happened to her *own* heart after these men came to her island and took advantage of her kindness.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "the cheek—and the tongue in cheek"
- **Line 13:** "Lay two pig's cheeks, with the tongue,"
- **Line 15:** "Remember the skills of the tongue—"
- **Lines 17-18:** "in the soft pouch of the face—and how each pig's face / the cowardly face"
- **Lines 29-30:** "dice it small. / Dice it small."

**VOCABULARY**

Nereids and nymphs (Line 1) - Minor nature deities of Greek mythology, traditionally depicted as beautiful young maidens.

The tusker, the snout, the boar and the swine (Line 2) - Various names for pigs.

Bristling (Line 4) - The word "bristling" can describe coarse, spiky hair (like that found on a pig!), or it can refer to hair that is standing upright (as when an animal or person is angry or afraid).

Yobby (Line 5) - This describes someone (usually a young man) who is rude, loud, and aggressive.

Hogs (Line 6) - A particularly large pig that is raised especially for its meat.

Runts (Line 6) - Animals that are particularly small for their kind or the smallest animal in a litter.

Percussion (Lines 6-7) - Crashing, banging sounds made by striking one object against another.

Pail of swill (Line 7) - A bucket of pig food.

Sty (Line 8) - A pigpen.

Tongue in cheek (Lines 11-13) - In addition to describing the actual "tongue" and "cheek[s]" of the pigs, this is also a phrase referring to something that's insincere, sarcastic, or [ironic](#).

Strew (Lines 14-15) - To sprinkle or spread something around.

Lubricate (Lines 15-16) - To oil or grease something in order to minimize friction.

Mace (Line 20) - This has several applicable meanings here:

- a kind of spice
- a weapon from antiquity
- a stinging spray that people use to ward off attackers (i.e., pepper spray)

Blanched (Line 21) - Briefly boiled.

Singed (Line 21) - Burnt around the edges.

Lug (Line 23) - An informal word for ear.

Trotters (Line 27) - A pig's legs.

Sweetmeats (Line 27) - Duffy is referring, rather [ironically](#), to the pigs' testicles.

Baste (Line 37) - To pour juices on meat while it's cooking to keep it from drying out.

Spit (Line 37) - A rod that's used to cook meat over a fire.

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

"Circe" is a [free verse](#) poem whose 37 lines are broken up into

four stanzas of varying length. Like many of Duffy's poems—and particularly the poems of *The World's Wife*, the collection in which "Circe" was published—"Circe" is also a dramatic monologue: a poem told from a specific character's perspective to an unseen audience (in this, the off-stage "nereids and nymphs").

Free verse makes the poem's language sound casual and conversational, as though Circe is simply rattling off a tale in real-time. The use of free verse adds to the poem's humor as well, bringing this ancient, mysterious, mythical figure into the modern world.

Visually, the poem is also quite hefty; the lines are long, making the stanzas look dense with text. This feels intentional: Circe's story has traditionally been filtered through the men around her (especially Odysseus), yet this poem gives her the opportunity to describe things from her own perspective. In this way, the poem's long lines and thick blocks of text suggest just how rich Circe's perspective is—and how many details male narratives have left out of her story until now.

METER

"Circe" is written in [free verse](#) and therefore does not use [meter](#). This is generally the case for contemporary poetry and also for most of Duffy's work. The poem seeks to grant readers insight into Circe's mind, and the use of free verse adds to poem's feeling of authenticity and intimacy. The language feels organic rather than forced into a strict, rigid meter. Free verse also keeps the poem's language surprising, filled with rough rhythms suited to a poem about butchering pigs.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Circe" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). This keeps the language feeling casual, modern, and conversational. The lack of rhyme scheme also keeps the language feeling surprising and thus adds a bit of tension to Circe's tale.

The poem is still quite musical thanks to Duffy's clever wordplay and use of sonic devices like [assonance](#) and [alliteration](#). And because there's no predictable rhyme pattern, the occasional [end rhymes](#) that do pop up really stand out ("swine" and "mine" in lines 1 and 2, for example, or "sty" and "sky" and lines 8 and 10). These intermittent rhymes are like surprising jolts of sonic intensity that keep readers on their toes.

children before he eventually returned to his own family.

In this poem, however, this history is only [alluded](#) to; the poem never mentions Odysseus by name, nor any of the other men who visited Circe's island. Instead, Circe's perspective takes center stage as she butchers the men-turned-pigs and teaches the "nereids and nymphs" (i.e., other minor female figures from Greek mythology who live on her island) how to cook them. Her vivid descriptions of the control she has over these pigs are laced with anger and [irony](#), suggesting that for her, this process is a chance to take revenge on the men who've hurt her and the women in her care.

Circe has often been depicted as a wily, predatory temptress, her tale typically filtered through the men who have passed through her orbit. Here, however, Duffy gives Circe a chance to speak for herself and add some nuance to her tale. This Circe wasn't born a heartless destroyer of men; she once eagerly "hop[ed] for men" to visit her island. The poem implies that she got [metaphorical](#) pigs instead: crude, violent, selfish male visitors who took advantage of her hospitality. In her telling, she's a disillusioned woman giving men what they deserve.



SETTING

Though the poem doesn't state it outright, it takes place on the mythical Greek island of Aea where the enchantress Circe lived alongside other "nereids and nymphs."

Towards the end of the poem, Circe recalls "kne[eling] on this shining shore / watching the tall ships sail from the burning sun / like myths." This [alludes](#) to the arrival of Odysseus and his men, who, as told by Homer in *The Odyssey*, came upon Aea on their way home from the Trojan War. In the poem's depiction of Circe, she was a young woman "hoping for men" when these ships first arrived, and she swam out into the sea to greet them.

Most of the poem, however, stays away from the shoreline and closer to where Circe keeps her men-turned-pigs. In the first stanza, she describes standing "with a pail of swill" (or scraps of food for the pigs) "at dusk, at the creaky gate of the sty" (or pig pen). She mentions the "sweaty, spicy air," supposedly laced with the smells of terrified pigs, and "the moon / like a lemon popped the mouth of the sky," an image that hints at what Circe is going to do with the pigs: eat them.



SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is Circe, a mythical sorceress who lived on an island and was known for seducing men and then turning them into pigs. She most famously did this to the crew of Odysseus, the legendary Greek hero from Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus outsmarted Circe and made her undo the spell; Circe and Odysseus became lovers, and she bore him multiple



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is among the most acclaimed and high-profile poets in the contemporary UK. Born in Scotland in 1955, she became the UK's first female poet laureate in 2009 and served in the position for the next 10 years.

"Circe" was published in Duffy's fifth poetry collection, *The World's Wife* (1999). In this collection, Duffy writes from the viewpoints of the wives, sisters, and female contemporaries of famous and infamous men. Some of her characters include Mrs. Pilate, Queen Kong, Mrs. Sisyphus, Frau Freud, Elvis's Twin Sister, and Pygmalion's Bride. In witty, conversational language, *The World's Wife* subverts traditional male perspectives, examining instead the ways that women's stories have been ignored or overlooked.

Duffy was deeply influenced by Sylvia Plath, whose *Collected Works* she received for her 25th birthday. She would go on to edit an edition of Plath's poems and to write [a piece for *The Guardian*](#) about how Plath's work, with its revolutionary interest in women's internal lives, blazed a trail Duffy would follow in her own poetry.

This poem in particular, of course, also draws from the Greek myth of Circe, a sorceress famous for transforming men into pigs. Circe appeared as a relatively minor character in Homer's *Odyssey*, where she became the titular hero's lover for a time and bore him multiple children. While often depicted as a dangerous temptress preying on men, Circe has also been considered a sexually liberated and even feminist figure at various points in history.

Duffy wasn't the first to reimagine Circe or to retell the myth from Circe's point of view; in fact, many female writers have gravitated toward her story. Some famous poetic interpretations (all entitled "Circe") include those by 19th century English poet [Augusta Webster](#) and early 20th-century American poets [Leigh Gordon Giltner](#) and [Hilda Doolittle](#) (also known as H.D.). Perhaps the most famous contemporary retelling of the myth is Madeleine Miller's 2018 novel, *Circe*.

"Circe" is written as a [dramatic monologue](#), a form Duffy often uses in her poetry. Dramatic monologues are told from the perspective of someone who is clearly not the poet (in this case, Circe), and they are addressed to a specific audience (here, the "nereids and nymphs").

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Duffy was born in Scotland in 1955 and came of age during second-wave feminism. While early feminism had been focused primarily on securing women's right to vote, second-wave feminism addressed a wider range of issues including reproductive rights, domestic violence, workplace equality, and more. Second-wave feminism was responding to many of the restrictive gender norms of the mid-20th century, including the idea that women's purpose in life was to become demure mothers and wives. By the 1990s, when this poem was written, third-wave feminists began more actively seeking to upend patriarchal norms altogether—and with them, the treatment of the straight, white, male perspective as the model for all human experience.

It's also worth considering the poem within the context of Duffy's own relationship with poet Adrian Henri. She and Henri began a relationship when Henri was 39 and Duffy was 16; they lived together for 10 years, with Henri acting not only Duffy's romantic partner but also as her mentor. Henri was persistently unfaithful, and it is likely that this formative relationship influenced some of the themes of *The World's Wife*.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A History of the Dramatic Monologue](#) — An overview of the dramatic monologue (a form Duffy often turns to in her poetry) and how it has been used over time. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ferWxPUN3ig>)
- [A Look at the Poet's Life](#) — A brief biography of Duffy from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- [A Review of *The World's Wife*](#) — Author Jeanette Winterson reviews *The World's Wife*, the collection in which "Circe" was published. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/jeanette-winterson-on-carol-ann-duffys-the-worlds-wife>)
- [An Introduction to the Circe of Greek Myth](#) — Check out a video explaining Circe's role in Greek mythology. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R17MB5DkVzA>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- [A Child's Sleep](#)
- [Anne Hathaway](#)
- [Before You Were Mine](#)
- [Death of a Teacher](#)
- [Education For Leisure](#)
- [Foreign](#)
- [Head of English](#)
- [In Mrs Tilscher's Class](#)
- [Little Red Cap](#)
- [Medusa](#)
- [Mrs Midas](#)
- [Originally](#)
- [Prayer](#)
- [Stealing](#)
- [The Darling Letters](#)
- [Valentine](#)
- [Warming Her Pearls](#)
- [War Photographer](#)
- [We Remember Your Childhood Well](#)



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