

## **Is She a Good Witch or a Bad Witch?: A Social History of Waterhouse's *Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus***

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### **Abstract**

Historically, witches have been portrayed as people, most commonly women, who command supernatural forces to manipulate the natural order of the world, usually for nefarious ends as evidenced by witch hunting manuals, fairy tales, and Classical mythology. This is certainly the case in John William Waterhouse's painting *Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus*, from 1891, in which a sorceress manipulates the ancient Greek hero. However, in 21<sup>st</sup> century visual culture, witches are often portrayed using their control of magic to battle evil and better the lives of innocent bystanders. Because of this shift, many Americans will no longer identify the witch as exclusively evil. This presentation will undertake a close reading of the Waterhouse painting and use a mixed methodology, including insights from anthropology, religious studies, and art history to interrogate this shift in morality regarding witches in Western culture. As a counterpoint to Waterhouse's *Circe*, a comparative case study of the character Prue Halliwell from the 1998-2006 show *Charmed*, thus showing the transition from dangerous femme fatales to empowered figures of heroism. Components researched and discussed will be the qualities associated with historical witches, such as Circe, compared to the contemporary television counterpart in an attempt to interpret this transition in culture. Ultimately, in this presentation, the argument that a shift in Western spiritual and popular values has caused a change in the perception of witches in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular and visual culture has inverted contemporary viewers' understanding of images depicting sorceresses, such as Circe in Waterhouse's painting, will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Witches, Art History, John William Waterhouse

### **1. Introduction**

As the importance of objects within culture isn't static, the significance of an object and its context changes as time changes. Women and men who practiced witchcraft were viewed differently in the Classical era than in the Victorian era than in the modern era. Figures such as Circe of Homer's epic the *Odyssey* have experienced this shift in interpretation and representation. Because of these shifts, viewers will understand the depiction of Circe by John William Waterhouse, a Victorian pre-Raphaelite artist, differently in 2013 than they would have in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was originally composed. Though a number of forces have contributed to this transformation, to understand how the metamorphosis occurs, analyzing these forces, their origins, and their impact is pivotal. These forces, namely the rise of the popularity of witchcraft and the movement of symbolism linked with the human figure within art circles both in Waterhouse's and contemporary times, can be linked to these changes in viewership and interpretation. Waterhouse's *Circe* and the modern counterpart Prue Halliwell of popular television show *Charmed* act as ideal anchors in understanding the growth and transition of the archetype of the witch in conjunction with these changes of media interpretation. The argument that a shift in Western spiritual and popular values has caused a change in the perception of witches in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular and visual culture has inverted contemporary viewers'

understanding of images depicting sorceresses, such as Circe in Waterhouse's painting, is posed

## 2. Methodology

In this reading of the Waterhouse painting and use a mixed methodology, including insights from anthropology, religious studies, and art history to interrogate this shift in morality regarding witches in Western culture. Though use of Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology* was limited, his text provided a useful parallel to the central argument regarding the consideration and study of stories, myths, and fables that implicitly provide viewers knowledge of the art they encounter. Panofsky argues that "pre-iconological descriptions" become problematic when employed in artistic interpretation as our knowledge of thematic elements, backstory, and prior knowledge of a work's inspiration are divorced when analyzing a work.<sup>1</sup> Without the ability to analyze iconographical and iconological motifs and elements, the significance of that work is lessened; without these elements, Circe no longer offers the cup to Odysseus to work her magic upon him. She simply becomes a beautiful woman surrounded by Aegean flora and fauna offering a drink to a man. Perhaps this latter interpretation of Waterhouse's work will manifest in its social life, a concept discussed in Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*. Arguing that objects that permeate various spheres of human culture have social lives just like the humans who own them, Appadurai proposes that these pieces of material culture grow, shift and transform within their eras with different significance, value, and meaning. As this paper captures the essence of this development of the witch archetype, Appadurai's argument provided a parallel worthy to craft this argument beside. Finally, *The Golden Bough*, a critical work in folkloric studies as a discipline, provided insight via the following statement, "...it is plain that the distinction between gods and men is somewhat blurred, or rather has scarcely emerged. The conception of gods and supernatural beings entirely distinct from and superior to man and wielding powers to which he possesses nothing comparable in degree and hardly even in kind, has been slowly evolved in the course of history. At first the supernatural agents are not regarded as greatly, if at all superior to man...with the growth of his knowledge man learns to realize more clearly the vastness of nature and his own littleness and feebleness in presence of it... Magic is relegated to the background and sinks to the level of a black art." From Frazer's words, the fear of magic, and as a consequence the fear of people, particularly women who have consistently been linked to magic such as Circe, defines our inherent fear of these powerful people, who are nearly gods themselves. With the growth of the age of enlightenment and scientific inquiry, this fear has shifted to an interest that retains the mysticism of the world around us and seeks to relish in it and thus a veneration that has been expressed in art from varying eras.

## 3. Witchcraft as Depicted by Waterhouse

*Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus* (Figure 1) functions as the idyllic anchor for this analysis as it is not only filled with metaphorical and allegorical significance, but it is also a compositionally accomplished work. Circe inhabits the majority of the space; Waterhouse demarcates her as the subject and the colors, covering and wreathing her while creating the illusion of shadow and depth, both idealize the sorceress as well as highlight her. In the background, the circular gold mirror, which reflects Odysseus in the implied foreground, evokes her mythos as the daughter of the sun-god Helios as well as provides an additional focal point to Circe in the center of the work. In creating this balance, Waterhouse creates a harmony where she is surrounded on either side by pigs, the half-circles of the mirror, her wand and chalice, and her lion throne. By manipulating these formal elements, Waterhouse idealizes his Circe, establishing a perfection that is emphasized by the haziness of the surroundings, the objects encircling her that make her the dominant figure of the piece, and his use of cool colors upon her porcelain skin that differentiate between her and the setting as well as the crimson-garbed Odysseus. By creating this moment within this manufactured universe, Waterhouse defines an emphasis on the magic that Homer and other Classical writers associate with the enchantress as well as outlines his own fascination with the power of the occult and the power of the female sex.

#### 4. Precursors to Waterhouse's Circe

To inform this study, one must consider the origins of Waterhouse's subject of the painting to understand in part the implications of the figure as a femme fatale. Appearing first in Homer's the *Odyssey*, Classical scholars and mythological enthusiasts are introduced to Circe as the protagonist docks his ship and crew on Aeaëa, the island upon which she resides. As Odysseus recounts in the tale, they traveled to the house of Circe, whom Homer describes as a "dread goddess,"<sup>2</sup> and all of the men, save Odysseus and a suspicious Eurylochus, are transformed, by "baneful drugs...and her wand. They had... shape of swine, but their minds remained unchanged even as before."<sup>3</sup> Though displays of her bewitching power are evident in the Greek text, classification of the goddess as a witch arise primarily in later Greek and Roman texts. As the daughter of Helios, god of the Sun, and Perse, an Oceanid or minor water goddess, Circe's parentage is of divine origin making her a minor goddess of magic rather than simply a human witch. Homer makes her a romantic companion to Odysseus, where not only does he remain on the island while indulging in carnal passions, but she acts as a guide to the hero.<sup>4</sup> She advises him on the paths back home to Ithaca as well as giving him directions to travel to the land of Hades to seek the counsel of the shade Teiresias with necromantic rituals she provides for him.<sup>5</sup> Though she is originally characterized as villainous, Hermes instructing Odysseus that not only does she rob men of their willpower and bodily form with magical rituals but that she was also treacherous in her chambers, her actions also prove benevolent as she pushes Odysseus along on his journey with her arcane knowledge.

Beginning with the *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius<sup>6</sup>, Circe no longer appears as an anti-heroic yet civil goddess but as the inspiration that future writers seemingly draw upon to describe witches inimical to Abrahamic religion, the state, and society. Rhodius writes, "With blood her chambers and all the walls of her palace seemed to be running, and flame was devouring all the magic herbs with which she used to bewitch strangers whoever came; and she herself with murderous blood quenched the glowing flame, drawing it up in her hands; and she ceased from deadly fear."<sup>7</sup> Roman writers such as Virgil strip the goddess of her divine status and make her solely into a sorceress living amongst the tortured men she'd transformed into beasts<sup>8</sup>. Adding what can be argued as the most fiendish characterization of the goddess to her mythology, Roman poet Ovid writes in his *Metamorphoses*, completed in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, about an episode where the goddess transforms Scylla into a beast. After being rejected by Glaucus, a sea god who requested a love potion from the goddess for Scylla who earlier rejected him, Circe "was angered, and since she could not harm him (nor, loving him, wished to do so) she was furious with the girl, who was preferred to her. Offended at his rejection of her passion, she at once ground noxious herbs with foul juices, and joined the spells of Hecate to their grinding."<sup>9</sup> She travels to a pool that Scylla occasionally bathed in as she found it peaceful and poisoned the waters with the toxic potion she brewed which would transform Scylla into the mythological creature that threatened the sea in Odysseus' story. With Scylla's body transformed, in place of her thighs, legs, and feet were jaws like Cerebus', Circe had her revenge, though because of her "hostile a use of her herbs' powers" Glaucus rejected her again<sup>10</sup>. Latin literature treats Circe almost completely as a femme fatale with no redeeming qualities that Homer attributed to her throughout the story; if she isn't being characterized as an evil enchantress, she is almost entirely absent. The Circe subplot of the *Odyssey* is given a lengthy selection spanning at least 200 lines in Homer's text and his hero benefits from his stay with Circe, who guides him closer to the end of his journey. In Virgil's epic, however, a paltry 17 lines are devoted to Circe, which lacks any form of the civility the goddess is attributed in Homer's tale. She is characterized solely as a villain as she is described only as one who ensorcells unfortunate travelers who land upon her island and Aeneas is protected from encountering her by Neptune's gale. All aspects of her home, which would ground her with an element of humanity or clemency are removed, as well as any indication that her powers with potions and spells could benefit Aeneas. Rhodius' and Ovid's interpretation of Circe, however, are the most marked change from a minor goddess of magic to what the Christians would in later centuries consider a witch: a figure, commonly female, who used supernatural forces to cause malevolent changes within both individual lives as well as to society at large. It is these elements that were explored by Latin writers that may have a played a role in crafting what Abrahamic religions would later define as those pertaining to witches.

Both Circe and the witch archetype are figures located on the periphery of society. The witches of ancient Greece were representations of things far divorced from societal norms: living on isolated islands away from other humans, a form of barbarism; women without males as their moral guidance, arguably an extension of the preceding attribute; women with power; and finally practitioners of a mystical, non-societal based religious movement. Circe embodies these characteristics wholly, the only question is that of the chicken or the egg: was

Circe an acknowledgement of a Jungian, universal archetype with attributes like these present throughout many cultures or was she an inspiration for a societal fear based on these elements described by early Latin writers. As Circe originally began as a goddess, one could argue that she helped begin the allegory when those pandering to the monotheistic Christianity as it grew from cult to mainstream denounced gods and goddesses, renaming them demons and sorceresses. While the gods often took the form of devils, goddesses were occasionally she-devils or more often witches working as agents of these devils. Women were often viewed as the lesser sex by Christianity and were the sex most likely to be influenced by the power of Satan<sup>11</sup>. This concept may have originally been a bastardization of the belief that “subjugated knowledge could be attached to the figure of the witch, nearly always a female figure, by women storytellers...[that] women are characteristically the bearers of this kind of knowledge.”<sup>12</sup> As the Church was governed primarily by the male sex, women with power equal or greater to theirs such as witches were considered an enemy necessary to root out. Not only were women who were free of male dominance and free in regards to their sexuality seen as enemies, the sorceress was chief among the dangers of women and heresies linked both with them and the occult. It was likely this history that John William Waterhouse drew upon when he painted what can be considered one of his best works to depict Grecian mythos.

## 5. Waterhouse’s Circe Amid Its Contemporaries

Waterhouse, the son of manufacturer William Waterhouse and Isabella McKenzie, daughter of a gentleman, was born in Rome, an element of his life that seemed to contribute to the Classical elements of his work. Though his family fled the French siege of Rome in 1849, his family returned to central Rome in 1853. In his childhood, Waterhouse’s chief biographers note he attended a Leeds school, located in England, but dreamed of returning to his Roman home, trying to connect to it through texts on ancient history and literature.<sup>13</sup> The classical stories inspired Waterhouse throughout much of his career, evidenced by his earliest sketchbooks which contained images of classical art and archaeology.<sup>14</sup> His renditions of mythological figures and beings comprise a large body of his work, increasingly so in his later career, the era in his life when he composed his *Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus*. His use of these elements may have led biographer Peter Trippi to the conclusion that, “Waterhouse brought to Pre-Raphaelitism a unique Symbolist sensibility... From both Greek myth and Romantic poetry, he began to paint.”<sup>15</sup> His Symbolist-inspired artistic disposition allowed him to recreate the mythic episodes he’d often interrogated in literature as the Symbolist movement was forwarded by artists who used symbolism as well as figurative elements and allusion to extol the values of non-Impressionist art.<sup>16</sup> In his work, he often employed allegorical archetypes such as the femme fatale, a French-derived term indicating a dangerous woman who uses her sexual appeal as a weapon, and coupled them with the Romantics’ fascination for supernatural creatures that represent abstract concepts that enlightenment and science of the period stifled.<sup>17</sup> And thus, his Circe was born.

Drawing upon the elements ascribed to Circe as a predominantly dangerous character, in his work, Waterhouse decided to capture the moment of the story in which Circe attempts to deliver her magical poison that will transform Odysseus into a beast like his companions. While he could have chosen any moment in the story, a bed scene between the witch and hero, a scene in which she restores Odysseus’ companions to their human forms, he doesn’t. Waterhouse chose the moment in which she appears most dangerous, the scene with the highest point of action within the selection, and the scene which demonstrates the power of not only the woman, but of the witch. The Circe does not seek to be Classical in its rendering but shows how Waterhouse tried to capture the beauty, power, and danger of the femme fatale in his art and present it to the viewer as strongly as possible. In this scene, Circe has already transformed Odysseus’ allies into pigs, who lay docile at her feet and cowering behind her golden throne. She sits domineering above Odysseus reflected in the mirror with a wreath of petals at her feet, a symbolic posturing that shows her seductive power over men and magical dominion over nature respectively. During this era, because men were the predominant sex consuming and producing art, Waterhouse may have composed Circe staring into the eyes of the viewer to evoke the power of the woman as dominant over men. A second interpretation of this has been suggested that Odysseus resembles Waterhouse and serves as a representation of himself struggling with the knowledge and power of art and the female sex<sup>18</sup>. Circe has a powerful gaze that looks outward to the audience and her size in comparison to the Odysseus, rendered as miniscule to the left of her, does not accurately foreshadow her defeat in the myth; but does accurately depict her strength as a goddess as well as her incredible mastery of supernatural forces and fate unlike the male hero.

Writer Judith Yarnall in her *Transformations of Circe*, makes note of Homer’s respect for women in his epics

and this same respect for women can be seen in Waterhouse's artistic body of work. Homer's Circe is considered a powerful goddess able to bewitch men with ease, only trumped by Odysseus because he is advised by the god Hermes whose sphere of influence is trickery and deception. Waterhouse's Circe is the same. It is evident that the power of magic and supernatural figures and influences captured Waterhouse so much, both in this depiction and many of his others, despite the fact that during this time period witchcraft and wizardry were illegal practices in Britain until 1950. Waterhouse, who may have been involved with occult practices, might have used his work to render the power not only of the feminine but of those who immersed themselves in a neopagan lifestyle and depicted images like his Circe as a way of depicting that power. Evoking the taboo that his contemporaries would have held regarding witchcraft, this Circe would draw upon those fears both positively and negatively. To the former, a sense of intrigue would have captured the onlookers of the femme fatale sorceress and drawn them to his work; to the latter, it would cement these fears of a witch as a dangerous woman flaunting both her sexuality and command of potentially malevolent magical forces.

## 6. The Legacy of Waterhouse's Circe

With the decriminalization of witchcraft in Britain in 1950, an upsurge of occult related practices occurred. One of the most popular, if not the most popular, was the rise of the Wicca with Gerald Gardner as the leader. Gardner, with an intrigue in pre-Christian paganism, founded the spirituality as an alternate to the status quo of Abrahamic and patriarchal religion and livelihood. Occurring before his movement was the publication of witchcraft and magic-related studies, such as Scottish anthropologist Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Egyptologist Margaret Murray's *Witch Cult in Western Europe*, academic texts, and personal interest spirituality guides. Gardner's *Witchcraft Today*, published in 1954 and his *Meaning of Witchcraft*, published in 1959, proved instrumental in attracting both the media and the general public. Figures such as Murray, High Priestess Doreen Valiente, and eccentric occultist Aleister Crowley were also instrumental in spreading the popularity of witchcraft in its infancy throughout the Western world. Gardner and Valiente through their publications and public discussions about how witches were painted as evil by a thriving Christian enemy who sought to root out heresy, made attempts at reconciling a troubled past while seeking a future in which the practitioners of "modern witchcraft" weren't demonized. Wicca touted beliefs in good magic that sought to benefit both individuals and society while denouncing all forms of magic associated with harm, positioning "black magic" as contrary to their practices. The female sex was similarly venerated due to Wicca's focus on the Goddess rather than the God. Reversing the dominant role of sex from the male to the female divine, Wicca touted the importance of the Goddess in the world with the God acting as an assisting catalyst in universal phenomenon such as change in season.

Though the witchcraft movement grew in popularity, gaining new branches of sub-religions and fascinated members throughout the decades, the associations with diabolical figures creeping through the night and causing malevolent happenings within society didn't die out. Contemporary Christians, whose ancestors had practiced Christianity and its varied branches for centuries, still associated magic and witchcraft with Satan. Despite Wiccans' staunch decrees that there was no Devil in their belief and that the Goddess and God, the chief spiritual beings in Wicca in its simplest hierarchy, were beings who encouraged benevolence and spiritual growth, Wicca was still considered a heretical evil by its Abrahamic counterparts. Figures such as Glinda the Good Witch may have planted a seed in the general public's mind that not all witches were evil, but being a fictional character unrelated to the religious movement didn't make her the best mascot. Despite the increase in popularity of alternative, magical religions, witches, apart from fantastical characters such as witches of the Oz universe and fairy tale witches, were not well-depicted in the public eye in various media. It wasn't until, arguably, the late 1980s and 1990s in America did the general public, witches and Wiccans see a change in the perception of witches, and Wicca through representation in film and television with films such as *Practical Magic* and *The Craft*. Though many of these screen depictions would try to create an image of witches as good, the 1996-2006 show *Charmed* is among the most impactful and regularly aired television depictions in its portrayal of witches as moral saviors protecting innocent humans from demons who sought to sow chaos.

With her sisters, also born with magical powers, Prudence "Prue" Halliwell used her abilities as a witch to fight evil beings that sought not only to harm them, but humankind as well. Prue, eldest sister and de facto leader of the coven, embodied not only the witch with her command of magical powers but also the additional elements discussed that factor into most historical depictions of the witch: living isolated from human beings; women without the moral guidance of the male sex; empowered with women with control of destiny and supernatural forces; and practitioners of a mystical, spirituality ungoverned by male or societal overheads.

Though the show is set in modern San Francisco, Prue and her sisters live in a modern manor and their neighbors are more often than not absent from the situations the witches face. For all intents and purposes, they do not exist. The sisters often battle demons within their home in explosive fashion with no great concern for questions from neighboring residents. Just as Circe lived in grandiose fashion in a manor isolated from her contemporaries and from those who would watch her rituals and spells and possibly interfere, Prue is free from exposure to her world which is unsympathetic and apprehensive to this supernatural underworld. She and her sisters straddle the boundaries of two worlds, separating their roles as regular women working in corporate America and trying to lead the lives of their contemporaries as well as act as saviors of the human race. Circe uses this isolation as a way to live completely free of the moral guidelines perpetuated by the Greek and Roman society; rules which strip women of any autonomy or free speech and leave them simply as property to their fathers or husbands. They both use the freedom to practice magic seen as unacceptable to their respective societies. As a single, working woman with an absent father and no permanent romantic interest, Prue's personal life is completely devoid of a male figure save an occasional boyfriend used as a short-term romantic counterpart. In an all-woman family line of witches, Prue is free from the constraints of men, an aspect of television in this era which concerned itself with female empowerment.<sup>19</sup> Just as Circe, she lives virtually isolated from male dominance and explores her abilities as a witch with no concern for patriarchal supremacy. Prue explores her role as a witch with varying levels throughout her role in the show, which was cut short due to the character's death in 2003. Though initially she reluctantly accepts her destined role as a witch and savior of innocents, she grows into her fate and was written as "the most powerful of all of [the sisters]."<sup>20</sup> It can be argued that this conforms to the idea that witches are powerful due to their freedom from men and a control of their own fates. Because her sisters explore more romantic elements of their lives—Piper dating and eventually marrying their magical intermediary between them and a group of advisors on magic and demons; and Phoebe who struggles with youth and romance throughout the series—Prue, whose biggest concern is growing magically and protecting her sisters, is considered the strongest of the three.

With the rise of female empowerment, Prue was designed as an enticing woman who, though largely unconcerned with romance, explored multiple minor relationships throughout her depiction. As Circe was a femme fatale whose sexuality and disinterest toward lasting romantic love made her a seductive and cunning enemy to Odysseus, Prue's sexual appeal was often highlighted as a chief attribute. In episodes such as Ms. Hellfire, she takes on the personage of a sexy assassin and beguiles a mob leader with her confidence and sex appeal.<sup>21</sup> Dressed in fine clothing that reveals a physique emphasized by eroticism, she is unconcerned with the dangers of assuming a hitwoman's identity, confident that her powers will be enough to keep her from harm's way. Waterhouse's Circe is comparable: dressed in translucent, wispy, blue-green robes, Circe bears an exposed breast—which in Victorian society was considered inconceivable outside of art—that compliments a physique that has been considered in the modern era desirable for the female sex. Though Odysseus is a hero with mastery over metis, the Greek concept of intellectual strength, as well as handiness with weaponry, Circe is confident in her dominion over witchcraft as well as her ability to seduce and bewitch the hero with the power of beauty and body. Pitted against two male foes, Prue conquers one with her seductiveness and the other with both her magical power and concern for her sisters, a distinct indicator of female power trumping oppressive power associated with these male figures. Though the outcome of Circe's conflict with Odysseus doesn't see her as the winner, the hero aided by Hermes in conquering her, Circe's physical appeal does conquer the hero as she convinces him to stay with her on her island for several years after their initial encounter. As Waterhouse depicted Circe as a femme fatale, he captured the power of female sexuality both related to their power as women and witches: a power linked with empowered enchantresses who beguiled men, and a power linked with Prue as an empowered woman and witch—elements that mark her as an embodiment of aspects once demonized amongst the female gender and now lauded in many circles.

## 7. Conclusion

As modern witchcraft concerned itself with the enfranchisement of women in religion and anti-demonization of the practice, women flocked to the spiritual practice and became its chief representation. The female empowerment movement of television in the 1990s gave birth to figures like Prue that would embody a freedom from male guidance, autonomy, and act as representatives of a spiritual movement that was once denigrated. No longer considered the villainous femme fatale, the witch has become a symbol of empowerment—mostly for women. While Circe, both in Classical history and John Waterhouse's work, embodied these same attributes, the Western

shift in values from the growth of feminism and spirituality changed how the modern viewer considers the witch archetype.



**Figure 1:** John William Waterhouse *Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus*

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