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Henry, Marissa

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# Witchy Woman: Power, Drugs, and Memory in the *Odyssey*

Marissa Henry  
University of California, Berkeley  
Comparative Literature  
Class of 2012

*Abstract:* In the *Odyssey* of Homer, one recurring trope is the use of drugs by one character to gain power over another. The two most prominent examples of the trope are Helen and Circe. Helen uses a drug to assuage the grief of Telemachos, while Circe tries to use drugs to seduce and capture Odysseus and his men. Both drugs are described as causing men to forget their homes. At the same time, Helen uses rhetoric to rewrite history, and Circe is mysteriously able to narrate Odysseus's future. A comparison of the two incidents, and of the women's other deceptive actions, reveals that these memory-altering drugs are part of a more general pattern of divine women having the ability to manipulate reality, along with the constant threat their beauty poses to the familial stability of mortal men. When the analysis is broadened to include other uses of drugs in the poem—those of the Lotus-Eaters and of Odysseus—their significance becomes more complex. They are associated with the danger of forgetting family, but also with godlike powers forbidden to mortals, and, finally, with the sort of deceitful intelligence and dishonorable fighting techniques employed equally by Helen, Circe, and Odysseus. Thus, an analysis of the instances of drugs in the poem reveals unexpected ideas about the protagonist. His position on the continuum between men and gods, and between male and female, becomes oddly unstable.

In the *Odyssey* of Homer, memory plays an important role in the plot; the story is driven by the need to return home, and so, memories of home motivate the characters to strive for their homecoming. In a poem in which memory is so vital, characters and entities that control memory take on a special status of both admiration and dread. In particular, two divine female characters, Helen and Circe, use drugs, among other techniques, to manipulate the memories of others. Both of these women use drugs for different versions of making men forget their homes and families. This shared practice functions in two different ways. First, it is a simple reflection of the effect that these women have upon the institution of the household. The drug, like supernaturally beautiful women, makes men forget their homes and lose respect for the fundamental structure of families. Second, the drug operates as a part of a larger pattern of characteristics and abilities illustrating these women's privileged status: as divinities, they have an almost clairvoyant comprehension of the universe, and they can manipulate not only memories of reality, but reality itself. Further, the interactions between these characters and Odysseus reveal the complex relationship between divine women and mortal men. With an examination of the methods he uses to overcome his obstacles, it becomes clear that Odysseus operates using a certain variety of *metis* that is oddly similar to the trickery of these women, which illuminates his unique ability to withstand the wiles of powerful women. Because his tactics are not the typical male strategies, but interwoven with feminine intelligence, he alone among men can mingle with men and women, humans and gods, without being cheated by their underhanded and magical machinations.

The first of the crafty women to enter the text is Helen. Even before she uses her drug to change the mood of the men, Helen's divine status has already been emphasized by her comparison to Artemis<sup>1</sup> and by her epithet, *Dios ekegauia*, "born from Zeus."<sup>2</sup> The scene in which she first appears in book IV is fraught with memories of the past. Telemachos seeks news of his father, while Peisistratos wishes to hear stories about his deceased brother. Everyone, even

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<sup>1</sup> Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1965), 68 (l. 122).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 70 (ll. 184, 219).

Helen herself, is weeping at the memory of lost relatives and companions. At this point, Helen, the master of appearances and manipulation, devises a solution so that their feast will not be spoiled with all of these sad memories. She adds to their wine “a medicine of heartsease... to make one forget all sorrows,”<sup>3</sup> one of many drugs she received in Egypt. While the drug is initially described positively as “free of gall,” the list of its properties calls its benign nature into question; it prevents any man from crying, “not if his mother died and his father died, not if men / murdered a brother or a beloved son in his presence / with the bronze, and he with his own eyes saw it.”<sup>4</sup> According to this passage, the drug causes men not only to forget their sorrows, but also to forget the importance of familial bonds, which is quite ominous in a poem so insistent upon the preservation of the *oikos*.

Following the administration of the drug, Helen demonstrates her ability to manipulate and exploit memory in other ways. In an effort to cheer the men, she tells an anecdote in which Odysseus disguises himself as a slave in order to enter Troy in secret, as a spy, and she recognizes him but does not betray him to the Trojans.<sup>5</sup> Telling this story accomplishes two things. First, it has a similar effect to the drug, distracting the men from their sorrow about the long absence of Odysseus by calling attention to the memory of his greatness. In addition, it discreetly deflects the blame that always accompanies Helen. She casts herself as complicit in the scheme of Odysseus against the Trojans, thereby deemphasizing her central role in the precipitation of the war and her proven lack of loyalty to Greece. What is more, she introduces the memory as “plausible,”<sup>6</sup> revealing that it may or may not have actually taken place, but that she has the ability to create verisimilar memories at will.

Menelaos responds to her story with a counterexample, redirecting attention to her status as a traitor, but his story serves as yet another example of Helen’s striking ability to understand and exploit memory. In his story, she approaches the Trojan horse, imitating the voices of the wives of the men she knows are hiding inside in order to trick them into making a sound and revealing their position. Here, she bends reality, tricking the senses of the men into believing that their wives are present, while using their memories of their wives to make them vulnerable. As her drug can make men forget their homes and families, Helen uses her voice to make them remember, then tries to take advantage of the emotional significance of the memory she evokes. It is also important that Odysseus is the only man not beguiled by her trick. This is not the only time when he alone can withstand the powers of feminine *metis*, which is connected to his own crafty, morally ambiguous, and not entirely manly nature.

Finally, when Telemachos is about to leave Helen and Menelaos, Helen gives one final performance of her supernatural knowledge. All of the characters witness an eagle killing a goose, which they take to be an omen, but Menelaos is unable to interpret the omen,<sup>7</sup> while Helen immediately and correctly tells Telemachos that it portends the homecoming of Odysseus and his revenge against the suitors.<sup>8</sup> She was previously able to understand and manipulate memories of the past, and here she knows what will happen in the future. In this way, Helen’s use of drugs to control memories points to a more general phenomenon of her character, a mastery of and simultaneous disregard for reality and facts. Just as she, a middle-aged and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 71 (ll. 220-221).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., (ll. 224-226).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 71-72 (ll. 235-264).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 71 (l. 239).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 229 (l. 170).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 229-230 (ll. 172-178).

notoriously promiscuous woman, always appears to be as young and as virginal as Artemis, and just as her stories can turn her from a traitor into an ally, her drug can turn bad memories into good ones. At the same time, as an adulteress, Helen represents the disintegration of the *oikos*. The drug reflects this threat to familial stability. In the same way that Helen's beauty caused Paris to disregard his family's safety and to bring destruction on their household, the drug has the power to allow men to watch the deaths of their near relatives without any distress.

The other female character who is skilled in the use of drugs is Circe. Although she is introduced in a very different way from Helen, in fact their characters share many qualities and actions. Unlike Helen, who appears in the poem as an ideal hostess and comes to reveal certain disturbing underlying qualities, Circe first enters the story as a villain, one in a long series of violent island-dwellers determined to destroy Odysseus and his crew, including the Cyclops and the Laistrygonians.<sup>9</sup> While Helen's drugs are called "free of gall" in spite of their dubious effects, Circe's potion, which has the same effect of making its users forget their homes and families,<sup>10</sup> is called malignant (*lugros*). To be fair, this drug may have the additional effect of turning the men into pigs; it is unclear whether their transformation occurs because of the drug or if she casts a spell with her wand. In any case, the transformation of the men into pigs is in keeping with the idea that women who are skilled with memory-altering drugs also have the power to change reality in certain ways. The mastery of drugs and power over reality are most clearly synthesized in the description of the beasts surrounding Circe's house:

...all about there were lions, and wolves of the mountains,  
whom the goddess had given evil drugs and enchanted,  
and these made no attack on the men, but came up thronging  
about them, waving their long tails and fawning, in the way  
that dogs go fawning about their master...<sup>11</sup>

With her "evil drugs," Circe has enchanted these vicious animals with an effect that does not seem evil at all, to make them as gentle and harmless as domestic dogs. The evil, however, lies in the fundamental changes that Circe can make to other beings. She makes the beasts friendly to humans, but she also turns humans into beasts, changing the essential nature of both people and animals. In this way, Circe does literally what Helen does more figuratively: Helen can change memory and perception with her voice and her words, but Circe, with her magic, can make very real and drastic changes to reality.

Once again, as with Helen's voice imitation trap, Odysseus is the only man who can withstand Circe's tricks. She expresses shock when he does not immediately turn into a pig,<sup>12</sup> then declares that this must mean that he is "resourceful Odysseus." He does not really escape her clutches with his usual wit, but with help from Hermes, who warns him and gives him the antidote.<sup>13</sup> This herb, which he calls *molu*, serves as a double, or a foil, for Circe's drug. Its effect is to counteract the memory-altering quality of the drug, but its duplicitous nature is implied by the description of its white flowers and black roots. Odysseus says that it is difficult for men to obtain, but possible for the gods, reiterating the idea of drugs being off-limits to mortals. Hermes

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 157 (ll. 199-200).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 158 (l. 236).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 157 (ll. 212-216).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 160 (l. 326).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 159 (l. 287).

also calls attention to the gender dynamic associated with drugs by warning Odysseus that if he does not extract an oath from Circe, she will take away his manhood. As a powerful woman, she threatens the masculine, dominant position of Odysseus. The warning of Hermes also points out that Odysseus, by meddling in the tricks that belong to female goddesses, is reversing his own gender role, removing himself from his proper place in the structure, both in terms of divinity and in terms of gender. In this way, Odysseus is saved by the intervention of Hermes, who, as a god, has access to powerful magical herbs. At the same time, according to Circe, Odysseus is apparently destined to best her because he has the same shifty and deceitful nature that she does.

Even so, it is worth noting that while Odysseus appears to win, extracting an oath of goodwill before he consents to sleep with her, Circe finally accomplishes the same thing with persuasion that she tried to do with her potions. She intended to turn the men into pigs, complacently eating and forgetting their home, and in fact, they do seem to forget their home for an entire year, “feasting on unlimited meat and sweet wine”<sup>14</sup> like the swine whose form they so triumphantly escaped. Thus, even beyond her use of drugs and magic, Circe understands the thoughts and feelings of others and manipulates them to get what she wants. Like Helen, she shares with her drug the property of making men forget their homes, fulfilling the same pattern of divine women posing a threat to the *oikoi* of mortal men.

Although Circe is introduced in this sinister manner, she soon becomes more neutral and is eventually a great help to Odysseus and his men. When they finally decide to leave her island, she seems to have prophetic knowledge of what they must do before they will be allowed to return home.<sup>15</sup> She gives them instructions for their journey to the underworld, then, once they return, she warns Odysseus of the troubles they will face on the way home and advises him on how to overcome these troubles.<sup>16</sup> Her advice proves correct: the men use her directions to escape the Sirens; Odysseus tries to fight against the Skylla, but it is, as Circe predicted, useless; and the men who eat the cattle of the sun against her warnings are killed. Her divine understanding contrasts with the limited mortal knowledge of Odysseus and his men. Especially in the last case, the situation is, to her, conditional. If they harm the cattle, they will die, but if they do not, they will live. It is within her capability to know and therefore to control the outcome of their journey, but the men do not have this extraordinary understanding of the world and therefore cannot escape their fate. Thus, Circe’s powers follow the same pattern as Helen’s. Her knowledge of drugs and ability to control memories are aspects of a set of skills stemming from her talent for comprehending and altering reality.

While these two characters resemble one another in many evident ways, it is possible to gain further insight into their significance in the poem by examining other manifestations of the same pattern. The most glaring example of similarities to Helen and Circe’s drugs appearing elsewhere in the poem is the Lotus-Eaters. These people

live on a flowering  
food... nor did these Lotus-Eaters have any thoughts of destroying  
our companions, but they only gave them lotus to taste of.  
But any of them who ate the honey-sweet fruit of lotus  
was unwilling to take any message back, or to go  
away, but they wanted to stay there with the lotus-eating

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 164 (l. 468).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 163 (l. 490).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 185-189 (ll. 12-141).

people, feeding on lotus, and forget the way home.<sup>17</sup>

The Lotus-Eaters are at once friendly and profoundly dangerous. Unlike the Cyclops and the Laistrygonians, they are peaceful and have no wish to harm Odysseus and his men, but like almost every malevolent force encountered by Odysseus on his journey, they threaten to hinder the homecoming of the men. Although their food is not referred to as a drug, its effects are identical to the drugs of Helen and Circe, causing those who consume it to “forget the way home.” The malevolent force of the Lotus-Eaters is that they weaken the pull of the *oikos*, the same threat posed by Helen and Circe, but their presence in the poem is somewhat complicating, since they are not gendered. While the pronouns used to refer to them are masculine, it is never made clear whether they are a group of men or a mixture of men and women. Odysseus sends his companions to look for “men, eaters of bread,”<sup>18</sup> using the term *aneres*, clarifying the maleness of the hosts Odysseus hopes to find and their status as ordinary, bread-eating mortals. They find instead the Lotus-Eaters, who are not called *aneres*, but they also do not possess the overtly feminine qualities of Helen and Circe, nor do they have a detailed personality or an agenda to further as these characters do. They do not seem to have any magical powers or remarkable skills. However, they do seem to be more divine than mortal in that they live on the lotus fruits rather than practicing agriculture. The episode of the Lotus-Eaters, when considered in conjunction with Helen and Circe, reasserts the importance of one aspect of the other instances of drugs: their effect upon memory as a force that undermines the *oikos*. The Lotus-Eaters, with their miraculous, naturally occurring food, which negates the desire for homecoming, approach the condition of the gods, who eat ambrosia and who do not particularly respect the laws of marriage and family. As Odysseus and his men pass through the company of various divinities and near-divinities, they risk forgetting the rules that bind mortals together in families and in society as a whole, under the influence of the drugs, foods, and powers of these beyond-human beings.

More importantly, the only other character in the poem who ever attempts to use a drug to further his interests is Odysseus himself. The same word used for Helen and Circe’s drugs, *pharmakos*, also appears in book I, in a story told by Athena to Telemachos about his father. In the story, Odysseus travels to Ephyre in search of a “*pharmakon androphonon*,” a man-killing drug, to apply to his arrows, but Ilos, the man he meets there, refuses to give him the poison because he fears the gods.<sup>19</sup> This story may, of course, be a fabrication employed by Athena to inspire courage in Telemachos, but regardless of its factuality, its presence in the text underscores certain truths about Odysseus, illustrating the nature of his character in relation to Greek culture and values. Not only is he an archer, a type of warrior that is less respected because it allows the fighter to do harm from far away, without risking his own body as much as a hoplite, but in this case, he wishes to use poisoned arrows, an even more deceitful way of fighting. It is clear from this anecdote that Odysseus “fights dirty” in the same way that Helen and Circe do, not following the rules of honorable, masculine warfare based on force, but cheating by using a drug to gain an unfair advantage. To confirm this impression, the reason that Ilos will not give him the drug is that he fears the gods, indicating that the gods, who normally rule the domain of magical drugs, disapprove of, or perhaps resent, such powerful substances being used by mortals.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 139 (ll. 84-97).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 139 (l. 89).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 34 (l. 263).

In fact, beyond this anecdote of dubious legitimacy, the tendency to trick his enemies using contrivances similar to those of his female rivals permeates the character of Odysseus, most notably in his treatment of Polyphemos in Book IX. He uses the wine given to him by Maron, a priest of Apollo, a “divine drink,”<sup>20</sup> to deprive Polyphemos of his sensibilities so that he may blind him and escape. Using a substance with unusually, even divinely, potent properties to affect the mind of an adversary is the very same scheme adopted by Helen and Circe. Hence, as mentioned above, Odysseus, with his almost effeminate willingness to stoop to deceit, is peculiarly resistant to the ruses of deceitful women. First, in the story that Helen tells, they meet because he comes to Troy not in open battle, but as a spy, wearing the disguise of a beggar. He and Helen share this propensity for false appearances and disregard for honor. In Menelaos’ story, he recognizes Helen’s imitation of the wives’ voices, while the rest of the men are ready to give themselves away, because it is a trick he could just as easily have invented himself. In the instance of Circe, Odysseus is able to outsmart her (to the degree that he does) because he thinks in the same way, always being on guard against the dangers of drugs and persuasion, and because he is assisted by Hermes, a god who shares Odysseus’s *polumetis* nature.

To conclude, the presence of drugs in the *Odyssey* creates significant implications, both for the characters of Helen and Circe and in relation to the rest of the poem. The comparison of the two women yields a rich portrait of female divinity: on one hand dangerous to the family, the very fabric of society, but on the other, wise and powerful far beyond the grasp of mortal men. It also complicates the function of memory, which comes to appear as a frighteningly pliable measure of reality. These appearances of drugs also operate in conjunction with similar situations in the text to create broader impressions of the uneasy relationship between men and gods and of the ambiguity of the main character with respect to morality and to gender dynamics. In creating such a vivid representation of feminine cunning intelligence in Helen and Circe, Homer adds a layer to the cunning intelligence of Odysseus, who attempts to blend feminine strategies with his masculine warlike strength in order to become invincible, and yet still cannot attain the vast knowledge and power of the goddesses.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 142 (l. 205).

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