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DANGEROUS FLOWERS

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Image 1: Datura Stramonium (source: wikimedia)

Introduction

In a a recent advertisement for his new scent *Datura Noir*, Serge Lutens describes his perfume in this way.:

> *DATURA NOIR*
>
> *The beauty and splendour of the Datura lies in its deadly petals which, come night-time, give off their hypnotic, captivating scent.*
>
> *Like a diabolic trail of smoke left by Satan in Paradise. Some say this fragrance will enthrall you; others that it will make you crazy.*
>
> *Others still that excessive exposure will kill you dead. To be precise, one night I took brugmansia, also known as Angel's Trumpet, and distilled the notes of its lingering memory.*

It would be easy to replace the name of "Satan" with "Circe" in this provocative advertisement for Lutens' fragrant datura perfume. In the Homeric epic, datura is the drug that Circe uses to turn the crew of Odysseus' ship into pigs so that they will forget their desire for a return to their homeland. Circe, hereby, is turned into the witch seductress extraordinaire for the rest of history. How are we to understand this turn of Circe's significance? More importantly, how might we secure deeper sources of meaning for this mythological woman to enhance and expand our imaginations for life and living today?

The Psychology of Patriarchy

If you want to witness the patriarchal expropriation of ancient mythology full force, just examine what happened to the divine Circe since the original telling of this tale. Turned into a malevolent witch that comes to represent the potential evil and threatening sexuality that lurks in every woman, the character of Circe has endured a brutal revision of the power of women that continues today. Certainly, socio-economic systems of power and privilege benefit from and ensure the perpetuation of such misogynistic messages. I would like to present a complementary psychological framework from the scholarship of feminist-Freudian psychoanalysts to this understanding. What?! Freudian-feminists? Isn't that the ultimate contradiction in terms?

Psychoanalytic scholars, such as Nancy Chodorow, claim that much of Freud's theory has been misunderstood by ignoring the social settings and symbolic significations that provide the context for understanding its insights. For example, let's consider one of his most controversial notions of Freudian theory: *penis envy*. I can't imagine that any of my female and feminist friends would agree with this definition of identity. It's easy to dismiss the notion of penis envy until you consider the social context of power and privilege. Then, it totally rings true. How?

Answer the following questions. Which gender in our society gets promotions and higher wages? Answer: Men. Which gender has repeatedly benefited from and has been protected by legal systems and institutions? Answer: Men. Which gender has a penis? Answer: Men.

Now answer this question. Who doesn't possess the penis as a symbol and privileges of power in a social setting and system of inequality? Answer: Women. Hence: Penis envy is the desire for equity and equality.

The concept of penis envy leads to men's related psychoanalytic fear: *castration anxiety*. You can easily follow the logic here. If you own the symbol, power, and privileges of maleness (the penis) in an unequal society, might your greatest fear be castration and the loss of that status?

In this way, we might begin to understand the psychosocial origins of patriarchy. How might this approach offer us insight into the Circe myth and its magical plants? Symbols are our tools for understanding. If the penis is a symbol of phallic power that is manifest in Odysseus' sword, how are we to interpret Circe's corresponding wand?

Potent potions

We must consider the agrarian context of ancient mythology and its heightened significance of the botanical world it expresses. In the vase paintings of ancient Greece, we typically don't see Circe raising her wand against Odysseus, but, instead, she uses the wand to stir her magic potions of transformation. The sword vs. the bowl. Need I explain this obvious sexual symbolism? The messenger god Hermes gives Odysseus the plant called *moly* to add to this Circe's bowl to protect him from his metamorphosis into a pig like his crewmates. It protects him from becoming a pig like the others after he drinks the brew, but it doesn't get him home again. He then becomes Circe's lover and lives in bliss until his memory returns and he desires his wife and his return home once again. This famous scene was painted on a *kylix* (an ancient Greek drinking cup) now in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Would you drink from such a goblet offered to you be your hostess?

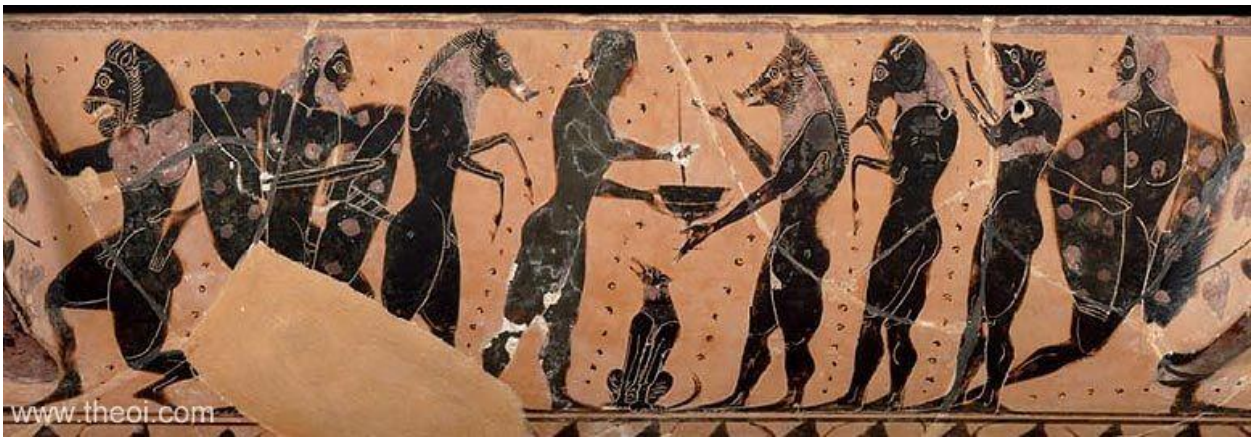

Image 2 Kylix depicting Circe and her potion (source: wikipedia)

Scholars and scientists have identified two plants in this episode. One is the toxic datura flower in Circe's baneful brew that transforms Odysseus' crew into pigs so that they lose their memory of home. The other, Hermes' *moly*, is a mystery but has been identified as *Galanthus nivalus*, the snowdrop flower, that offers memory enhancing potencies. With a white flower that emerges form a bulb in early Spring, this plant is used as an antidote to datura poisoning. Its active alkaloid, galatamine, also contained in the narcissus flower, is used to treat Alzeimer's disease today. However, if Odysseus' retrieval of consciousness is symbolized by his return home, then moly helped but it did not get him home again. (Similarly, the snowflake flower helps avoid, but does not cure, the memory losses of Alzheimer's disease.) Instead, it was Circe, "an awesome goddess of human speech" (Od. 10. 136), who revealed to Odysseus the necessity of his journey through the realm of Hades as prerequisite for his return home.

From Odysseus to Ulysses

In James Joyce's reworking of the ancient epic in his novel *Ulysses*, his protagonist Leopold Bloom, just as Odysseus had wandered, travels the streets of Dublin in the span of a single day (unlike Odysseus' twenty years) oftentimes reminiscing about his past with his wife and both his and her lovers. His wife is named Molly Bloom. Joyce was not subtle in this choice of names but intentionally proposed that she is the antidote, like the Homeric *moly*, for Bloom's wanderings. In the episode named "Circe," Bloom experiences unrelenting hallucinations about the past, including the gift of a "potatosoap" that was given to him by his departed mother. He carries this amulet constantly with him in his pocket even though it has become black and shriveled. It is his lucky charm, his talisman, his moly. In this episode, he briefly gives it over to a brothel woman named Zoe and we see his multiple hallucinations of sexual guilt and wish fulfillment unfold. His return to consciousness from the enchantments and hallucinations he experiences during this visit to this brothel is achieved when he retrieves this molly that he calls his "potatosoap, " his moly, from Zoe. It may be no surprise then that potato is related to Circe's baneful potion with another member of the Solanaceae nightshade family, the datura flower.

In Episode 5, titled "The Lotus Eaters," we see that Leopold Bloom has taken on the pseudonym of Henry Flower to communicate with an erotic penpal, Martha Clifford. She asks him a personal question "What kind of perfume does your wife?" and hereby we are clued in to a major sensory theme of the novel. He pulls out the pin of the unscented yellow flower from the letter and decides not to see her again. He daydreams about the narcotic effects of smoking. Here we join Bloom's extravagant journey into the narrative power of plants in this novel.

In Episode 13, titled "Nausikaa," Bloom meets another woman, named Gerty, who reminds him of Martha Clifford. Unlike anosmic Martha, Gerty has an aroma: a cheap smell that reminds him, in its contrast, with the complex scent of his wife Molly's opoponax. After Gerty has left, Leopold still smells her perfume and what it says about her character.

“What is it? Heliotrope? No. Hyacinth? Hm. Roses, I think. She’d like the scent of that kind. Sweet and cheap: soon sour. Why Molly likes opoponax. Suits her with a little jessamine mixed” (U 13:1008-11).

Smell is memory and this reminds him to pick up his wife’s lotion from the pharmacy on his return home. Memory of Molly is his moly that will lead him home gain.

Image 3: Opoponax (source:wikipedia)

What perfume does your wife?

Gender politics are at the heart—or should I say at the “nose”—of this story. In the Episode titled “Nausicaa,” Joyce has his main character Leopold Bloom wonder about the difference between “mansmell” and “womansmell” and where it comes from. Bloom explains it in this way: “Tell you what it is. It’s like a fine veil or web they have all over the skin, fine like what do you call it gossamer and they’re always spinning it out of them, fine as anything, rainbow colors without knowing it. Clings to everything she takes off. Vamp of her stockings. Warm shoe, Stays, Drawers. …Know her [Molly’s] smelllin a thousand… Bathwater too. …wonder where it is really. There or the armpits or under the neck. Because you get it out of all holes and corners.”

These women’s scents then—Martha’s lack of smell, Gerty’s cheap rose perfume, and Molly’s opoponax smell —are used as signals to explain olfactorily their characters and beings. Gerty has a little perfume trick she uses to seduce her lovers through scent. She carries with her a cottonwool wad of fabric doused in her favorite perfume. And waves it in the direction of her lover without him noticing the trick. Her ruse, however, falls flat as the inferior smell of her perfume that only serves to remind Bloom of Molly’s superior scent of opoponax.

Joyce’s choice of opoponax, comparable in aroma to resinous myrrh, contributes its Greek berbal source to carry its significance in this novel. The Greek linguistic roots *opos* means juice and *ponax* refers to peace as in the sense of panacea and healing; this flower’s smell keeps Bloom coming back to Molly through the lure of redolent memories. Gerty’s cheap rose scent only

serves to remind Bloom of what is missing without opoponax. In the final lines of the novel, we witness the power of seduction suffused with this perfume. Leopold Bloom had first fallen in love with Molly through her smell, and after all their lovers and infidelities, Leopold and Molly Bloom fall back in love through the smell, taste, and shape of her bottom: "He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump, on each plump melonous hemisphere, in their mellow yellow furrow, with obscured prolonged provocative melonsmellonous osculation." Her "adipose anterior and posterior female hemispheres" lead her husband to "islands of the blessed, the isles of Greece, the land of promise…redolent of milk and honey."

Throughout the massive *Ulysses* we don't hear the voice of Molly Bloom—until, that is, the final Episode 18, titled "Ithaka," the island of Odysseus' homecoming, when the entire chapter is her voice and hers alone. Of course, scholars have debated Joyce's intention with this curious and stark opposition. Does it suggest that Molly has finally found her voice and a sign of liberation, or does it confirm her repressed status as a woman in 19th century Dublin, Ireland? Traditional scholarship has voted differently on these options without a final accord on Molly's status. You decide. This is Molly's soliloquy at the end of the last chapter of this novel; the only sentence in this chapter that ends with a period.

"And then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like med and yes I said yes I will Yes." (U18:1605)

Joyce called Molly the "Gaea Tellus," the Earthg Mother. She is the source of love and awareness narrated in his return to her. Without guilt, wish fulfillment, or unfulfilled desire, it is his cure, the panacea of return to consciousness.

In 1921, Jame Joyce's novel *Ulysses* was labeled pornographic and banned in the United States. The case was brought to the Supreme Court to determine whether this novel was Art or just written to "promote lust." Through the 1933 Supreme Court decision, titled *United States vs. One Book Called Ulysses*, it was decided that this novel, now considered one of the greatest works of Western literature, was allowed to be published in the United States.

From Joyce to Miller

Many people are more familiar with Madeline Miller's 2018 best-selling reinterpretation of Homer's myth from her book titled *Circe* than they may be from reading Homer's original ancient Greek *Odyssey*. Miller clearly is addressing the patriarchal injury that I discussed at the beginning of this essay. She presents Circe as a traumatized goddess at the hands of the Greek sailors who strangle and rape her in this retelling of the Odyssean episode. Miller's rendition of our archetypal tale is a strangely inaccurate representation of Circe. Whereas Homer repeatedly describes Circe's "singing with a sweet voice" (10. 221). Her voice is so beautiful that the narrator describes it as "Friends, within someone goes to and from a great weaving-web, singing

sweetly so that all the floor echoes; some goddess it is or some woman. Come let us quickly call to her" (Od. 10. 226ff.).

In contrast, Miller has chosen to repeatedly describe Circe's voice as cacophonic: "I [Circe] went to my house…I sang, which had never been allowed before, since my mother said I had the voice of a drowning gull" (p. 82). When this novel's Circe sings, it is "aimless air" (p. 90). In Miller's desire to give this oppressed goddess a voice, she has denied her of her Homeric beauty. Whereas Homer gives her the mysterious description of being a goddess with a beautiful voice and "an awesome goddess of human speech" (10.136), Miller revises this attribute as a source of Cire's impotence: Hermes tells her that she has the "voice of a mortal so she will not be respected by men" (ch. 7).

The voice in ancient Greek belief was expression of the divine in the human world. When Homer describes Circe as a goddess who speaks "in human language" and sings beautifully as she weaves at her loom, the bard anticipates the other important weaver in this epic: Penelope, Odysseus' wife, who weaves, like the Fates, that to control Odysseus' life and return through her weaving. She, too, deceives the suitors who have invaded her palace. This deceit is part of her "thoughtful beauty" (Od. Od. 14. 65), thereby connecting the mind and consciousness with these women's control of the loom. Miller's deflation of Circe's divine voice serves to undermine current imaginative possibilities for women today who might use this rendition of the Circe story as their sole source of understanding women and ancient mythology without reading the ancient sources. This is denial of Circe's powers that are expressed through her divine voice. Even Joyce gave Molly the profession as a relatively successful singer.

In this denial of Circe's beautiful voice is a corresponding denial of her power, are we not seeing a repetition of the male gaze through this imaginative representation of a debased and violated female with an obnoxious voice? Certainly, Miller's earlier descriptions of Circe as a young girl gaining knowledge and experience of plant gathering are charming and delightful and so contribute to making her strangulation of the goddess so upsetting. Since this book is often cited as a "female perspective," we must question what engages the "female" imagination. Please let it not be restating and honoring victimization under the guise of challenging the patriarchy.

Miller's moly, as with Homer and Joyce, is the heart of our interest in entheogens an aromatherapy. The original description of moly, black root with white flowers and difficult to collect, is visual without a scent described in Homer's *Odyssey*. Yet when we examine the ancient Greek vase paintings of this mythical episode, they display Circe mixing a mortar bowl with her powerful wand pestle. She is blending states of consciousness and powers of transformation. From reading Homer, we do not know how Odysseus ingests the magical moly plant given to him by Hermes. Did he smell it? Did he add it to Circe's potion? Homer simply says that Odysseus drank Circe's "baneful" potion but was not metamorphosed into a pig. He negotiates with her for the return to humanity of his men. He then agrees to sleep with Circe and live with her until his nostalgia for return awakens again.

Conclusion

Describing his development of characters in *Ulysses* on a walk with his friend, Joyce explained "If they [the characters in his novel] had no body, they would have no mind." For Joyce and Homer, and for Miller, too, the body is the vehicle of mind and memory through the power of plants to shape consciousness and to open a greater awareness of our humanity through an experience of divinity.

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Image 4: Kyphos pot depicting Circe serving Odysseus her potion (source: Ashmolean Museum)