

# “We use witch as the word for a ‘bad woman’ — one who has too much power”

## Madeline Miller

*Author of this summer’s must-read novel, Circe*

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Once upon a time there was a little girl called Madeline Miller who had a very troubling habit. She would not — could not — stop reading. So her father and stepmother decided to teach her a lesson. They took away all her books and told her she could read for only one hour a day.

“It was like being strangled,” says Miller, looking pained even now at the memory. “It didn’t occur to me to argue. But I felt so angry. I would surreptitiously read the cereal box at breakfast, thinking, ‘Hah, you don’t even know — wholegrain oats and...’”

Miller delivered an exquisite response to that unusual childhood deprivation. Her first novel, *The Song of Achilles*, published in 2011, became a *New York Times* bestseller and winner of the Orange prize. And now her second novel, *Circe*, is poised to become the literary sensation of the summer, as much for the quality of its writing as its timeliness. It is the eminently readable story of a woman — Circe, the sorceress of Greek myth — fighting to be heard and to have influence, chiming with the #MeToo movement and the reverberations from the Harvey Weinstein scandal.

“I wasn’t trying to write Circe’s story in a modern way,” says Miller, now 39. “I was just trying to be true to her experience in the ancient world.”

Yet as she wrote, she found the modern world mirroring the subject matter. “It was a very eerie experience. I would put the book away and check the news. The top story was literally the same issue I had just been writing about — sexual assault, abuse, men refusing to allow women to have any power...”

Miller, it seems, is still making up for lost reading time. Entering her house today, in a quiet, tree-filled suburb of Philadelphia, is like tunnelling into a cocoon of books. Floor-to-ceiling shelves covering centuries of literature fill every blank piece of wall — from Tolkien to Selections from Herodotus to a tome on Greek homosexuality. Even the children’s shelves are stuffed

with child-friendly versions of Shakespeare plays.

In her new book, she reworks the familiar story of Odysseus from the perspective of the minor character Circe, a witch who turns men into pigs. Miller used a similar trick in *The Song of Achilles*, narrating the tale via Patroclus, Achilles’s male lover. “There’s no such thing as a definitive myth, nor should there be, because the retelling is what keeps them alive,” she says.

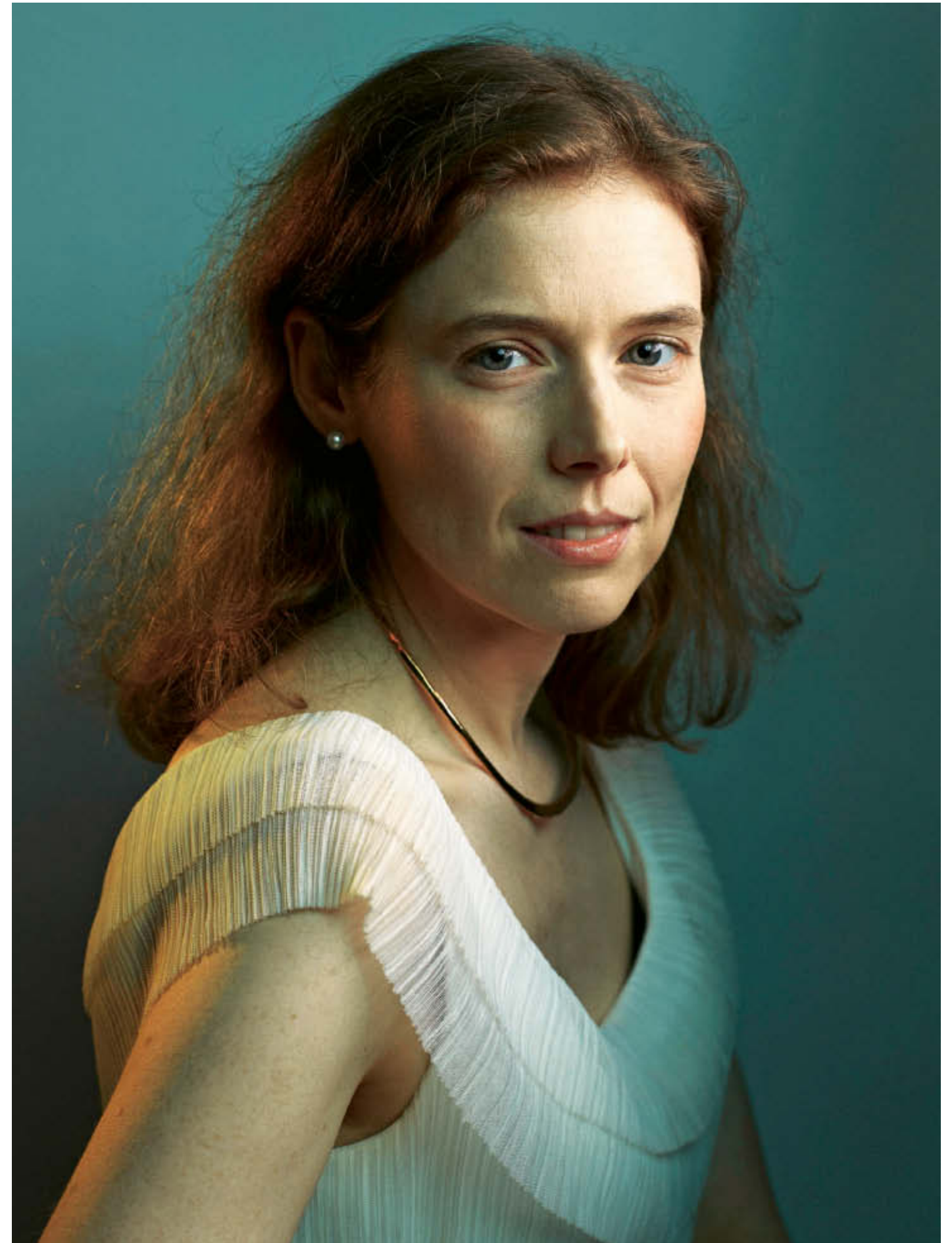
Giving prominence to Circe — whom Miller describes as the embodiment of male anxiety about female power — was a natural choice. “I was really passionate about giving voice to this female character who I think has been maligned,” she says, her two daughters, aged three and 18 months, leaping around her on the sofa. “I was drawn to the mystery of her character — why is she turning men into pigs?”

“Pigs!” shrieks her older daughter, V, collapsing in giggles. Perhaps anticipating the coming frenzy about her book, Miller wants only her daughters’ initials revealed. “It’s a hard thing to navigate and I’m a paranoid person,” she says, adding that she feels “a bit like a hermit crab that’s been pulled out of its shell”. Yet, at the same time, her success is a “totally impossible dream. When I hear that someone has read one of my books, I still have the desire to give them a kidney.”

Warm and unassuming, Miller is easy company, with a surprisingly raucous laugh. Dressed in jeans and a navy shirt, with frizzy hair and glasses, she apologises profusely for the chaos as her husband, Nathaniel, tries to contain the two girls, who are either collapsing with laughter or in floods of tears. “Moods change quickly here,” she explains.

The role of women in most ancient myths follows a predictable course. “Once they’ve served their purpose, they usually die,” Miller says. Or, as she writes in *Circe*: “Minos does not want a queen, only a simpering jelly he keeps in a jar and breeds to death.”

“You were under your father’s control,” she says today, “and then you got married and you were under your



STEPHANIE DIANI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

PHOTOGRAPH  
STEPHANIE DIANI



**GEEK ODYSSEY**  
The bookish Miller was obsessed by the classics as a child, poring over the *Iliad* and exhibits at the Met in New York

husband's control, and if your husband died you were under your son's control. That was the arc. I wanted to explore what you could do if you didn't want that."

Banished to a remote island after her powers of witchcraft are discovered, Circe comes into her own. Although Odysseus plays a supporting role as her temporary lover, it is Circe who takes centre stage.

"It shouldn't be revolutionary to treat women as complex, full people who have rights," Miller emphasises. As she wrote, she watched the election battle play out between Trump and Clinton and was depressed to see how timeless sexual politics are. "Hillary was called a witch. We still use witch as the word for a 'bad woman', 'woman who has too much power', 'woman who has power I don't want her to have'."

After Trump's victory, Miller took part in the women's marches with her daughters, mother and husband — then returned to her writing with a renewed sense of purpose. Next came the torrent of sexual harassment allegations. Again, Circe's story seemed to hum with relevance.

In Miller's telling of the story, Circe is raped. Surprised, she does not fight back, but then marshals her powers and turns her attacker — and almost every other man who comes near her — into a pig. Miller describes the transformation with relish: "His ribcage cracked and began to bulge. I heard the sound of flesh rupturing wetly, the pops of breaking bone. His nose ballooned from his face and his legs shrivelled like a fly sucked by a spider. He fell to all fours. He screamed, and his men screamed with him. It went on for a long time."

How does she think Circe might have dealt with Harvey Weinstein? "Hah!" she splutters. "Circe would feel that a pig is too good for Harvey Weinstein."

"What is so disturbing about these figures, Weinstein and Trump and, if you want to go back to the ancient world, Agamemnon, is they have tremendous power and are shaping the world around their sick vision of how men and women should interact and what can be done to women."

Her books have a sense of humour and lightness of touch that belie the years that go into their composition. She took a decade to write *The Song of Achilles* — as long, she points out, as the Trojan War itself — and had a similar experience with Circe, which took seven years to write. At first, she "wrote 300 pages and only two sentences felt right".

An only child, Miller's parents divorced when she was eight. "I was not surprised," she says. "Actually, I was thrilled because they were much happier apart."

She was only deprived of books at her father's house. Her mother went to the opposite extreme, reading her the *Iliad* when she was five and frequently taking her to the Egyptian and Greek exhibits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where she grew up. "By the 20th time, my mother was ready for the impressionists. But I wasn't interested, I only wanted the ancients."

**“Women are taught to take up less space — less space in the story, in their lives, and in the world”**

What was it about them that exerted such a pull on her? "The stories are so vivid," she enthuses. "This will make me seem like a very dark child, but I liked the fact that there was so much unfairness and injustice."

Her mother, who lives nearby and has come over to help out with the children, says Miller was determined and idiosyncratic as a child. "I had read a book about giving children choices, so I would say, 'Would you like me to carry you upstairs or would you like to walk up?' And Madeline would say, 'I don't want to go up the stairs at all.'"

"Now I have that child," Miller laughs, as *V* pirouettes in front of us, displaying her fourth outfit of the day.

Although she rarely sees her father now, Miller tries to be understanding of his approach to parenting. "It's easy to look at kids who are obsessed with something and think you have to pull them back. But if it's not hurting them, maybe kids should just be given some freedom to be weird. I read to escape, and I think people were offended by that, as if I was trying aggressively to shut out the world. But that was not the case. When I was reading I was always happy."

At school she felt isolated, absorbed in a world that bored other children. "I was definitely the big nerd in my class, the only one who really liked to read old stuff. I remember telling my friend excitedly about something I had just read in the *Iliad* and she said, 'Stop. If you say the name Agamemnon one more time, I'm going to fall asleep.'" Finally, at Brown University, where she studied classics, she discovered her niche. "I found people who would also get really excited about the *Aeneid*."

I ask to see the desk where she writes her books and she looks sheepish. "I'm going to be totally honest, I work in my bed — it's an old habit from high school." She has a small office in the house, but cannot bring herself to use it. Besides, she says, all her "scholarly books" are in the bedroom.

"We often talk about what our kids are going to think about 'Mommy working' — they just see me in bed in my sweatpants. Every now and then they burst in and jump on the bed and we have a few minutes together. I used to come out when I heard screaming and crying, but I have finally let go of that. I know my husband is with them and he's amazing."

A stay-at-home father, Nathaniel makes her writing possible. "He's been very kind about being primary parent," Miller says. He has also been an invaluable sounding board for her writing. "He's brutally honest. At first, I just wanted him to say nice things, but now I know I've earned anything nice he does say."

Miller's next novel will be inspired by either Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or Virgil's *Aeneid* ("one of the great literary passions of my life"). Judging by her track record, we have a few years to wait. In the meantime, she hopes women draw strength from Circe: "Women are taught to take up less space — less space in the story, less space in their lives, less space in the world. Circe is a story about a woman learning how to take up space."

Eventually, says Miller, she hopes the world will change so much that the book becomes what she originally intended — a myth, as far removed from reality as possible. "What I really hope is that one day my daughters will read this book and not relate to it at all. That is my goal." ■

*Circe* by Madeline Miller is published on Thursday (Bloomsbury £17)