

The Rewritten Female Characters from Traditional Myths--Case Analysis Based on *Qingshe* and *Circe*

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Abstract: Novelists have continuously invoked myths and epics. With familiar characters, novelists tell new stories and reflect modern problems in their creations. Chinese writer Bihua Li and American writer Madeline Miller both reframed a woman's story in their works *Qingshe* and *Circe*, critically reflecting on how the myths depict women from the perspective of patriarchy and stereotypes. This paper will compare the similarities and differences between the two novels and analyze how the two authors reflect on the predicament of female survival with classical figures.

Keywords: Myths Adaptation; Female Character; Feminism; *Qingshe*; *Circe*

1. Introduction

Myths are an unreplaceable part of human culture throughout history, while they are not invariable. Classical plots, characters, and themes of myths have been continuously reshaped and developed with the change of social culture. The strength of goddesses like Gaia and Nuwa envisioned by people of primitive society reflected the power structure of matriarchal society: females were powerful leaders of their groups. With the development of patriarchy, however, women gradually became vassals of men: they could not be involved in politics or were rigorously limited by roles as a wife and mothers. Similarly, new roles of women in the latter myths were emphasized: the Queen Mother and Hera started to strictly defend marriage and were no longer more powerful than their husbands. The more vulnerable female mortals and monsters were depicted as villains and threats that led to wars and death, though a lot of them were originally victims. Nowadays, writers from various cultural backgrounds reframe classical stories, discussing modern dilemmas in conversation between tradition and the present. American writer Madeline Miller and Chinese writer Bihua Li

reframe the story of *Odyssey* and *The Legend of the White Snake* from *Stories to Caution the World*, recreate the female characters, and discuss the dilemmas modern women face in daily life. The two authors both refer to and innovate the traditional story in aspects of plot, perspective, focus, and characters. By using familiar elements, the two authors inspire readers's interest in myths and reflection on feminist topics. This essay will analyze how Miller and Li reframe the characters in traditional myths and reflect the predicament of female survival in their novels.

2. Reference and Innovation from Myths

2.1 Plots

The plot of *Circe* generally follows that of the epic. In *Odyssey*, the author depicts *Circe* from the perspective of *Odysseus*. She is depicted as "living in Aiaia", and "the daughter of *Helios* and *Perse*"[1]. In the story, *Circe* turns the crew into pigs with her magic, while she is later defeated by *Odysseus* who is helped by other gods. *Circe* ultimately turned the crew back to humans and provided help for their journey[2]. Miller adopts a similar setting and plot in *Circe*. In the novel, *Circe* also lives as the daughter of *Helios* and meets and helps *Odysseus* and his crew after being exiled to Aiaia [3]. The plot of *Qingshe* also follows the original plots in *Stories to Caution the World*. In both of the stories, Bai Suzhen, the white snake, falls in love with and marries Xu Xian, but is later attacked by Fa Hai [4].

However, both *Circe* and *Qingshe* make a significant difference from the original story: the end. The two female protagonists both experience another new plot and develop a distinct end after the original end of the myths. In *Circe*, *Circe* ultimately gets rid of her role as a trapped witch, gives up her immortal life, and starts her new adventure outside of Aiaia [5]. Similarly, in *Qingshe*, Xiao Qing and her sister Bai start their new life and love relationship in

the modern world.[6]

Moreover, due to difference in perspective, both *Circe* and *Qingshe* extend the simple background of female characters in the original myths. In *Stories to Caution the World*, Xiao Qing, as a maid of her sister, Bai, only plays a secondary role in the whole story. By contrast, Li significantly replenishes Xiao Qing's story by depicting how she meets Bai and lives with her together before any male characters' appearance. At the start of the story, Li writes various details in a conversation between Xiao Qing and Bai, showing Xiao Qing's naive thought as a young monster, and foreshadowing the future tensions [7]. Miller also extends Circe's background information from a few words in *Odyssey* to a whole story, making Circe a more solid character. For instance, Miller provides readers with plenty of details on Circe's interaction with her family. Circe has been teased by her siblings and has been suppressed by Helios in their conversation. Through depicting Circe's reaction to these difficulties, Miller displays Circe's rebellious, brave personality [8].

2.2 Perspective and Focus of Narration

Both Li and Miller replace the perspective of myths with the perspective of a female character. In *Stories to Caution the World*, Feng Menglong uses a third-person perspective to tell the story. He takes Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian as the main characters, and almost all the plots are about the interaction between the two main characters. By comparison, Li uses Xiao Qing, the supporting character, as the new protagonist of *Qingshe*. She adopts the first-person perspective to emphasize Xiao Qing's actions and feelings. Miller makes a similar choice. While *Odyssey* tells the story through the perspective of Odysseus and ignores the feelings of Circe, Miller chooses to tell the story through the perspective of Circe and depict elaborate details of Circe's experience and personal feelings. Choosing the perspective of a female character leads to the change of stories' focus. In the two novels, female characters are no longer the puppet in men's story, but the focus of all plots. The two novels also emphasize a theme different from the original texts. In Bai and Xuxian's original story, Feng focuses on their romance, emphasizing the morality of relationships and the opposition between monsters, nature, and humans. Although also depicting romance, Li mainly writes about how romance affects the

friendship between Bai and Xiao Qing and Xiao Qing's personal growth. For instance, in *Qingshe*, Xiao Qing naturally longs for Bai and Xu Xian's relationship. This emotion fosters Xiao Qing to get rid of her naive status as a monster and study the rule and ruse of human society to be involved in the relationship. Xiao Qing's desire and jealousy also lead to the loss of reliance and trust between her and her sister Bai [9]. Xu Xian was not the protagonist, in this case; he is the catalyst of Xiao Qing and Bai's growth, a part of their immortal life. Xu Xian, as a male, brings elements of patriarchy and humanity into the sisters' lives: suppression, discrimination, lies, and feminine roles. Through being harmed in their relationship with him, Xiao Qing learns a class and realizes the truth of human life, making her less naive and vulnerable, and rethinking her relationship with her sister. The focus of the *Odyssey* on Odysseus's adventure, including his interaction with Circe, is for expressing Odysseus' growth. In *Circe*, however, Odysseus's story becomes part of the supporting plot to Circe's growth. For instance, when describing the motivation Circe attaches to Odysseus' crew and turns them into pigs, Miller writes the detailed background. Instead of naturally being evil and irritating, Circe becomes alert and loses the trust of males because she was vulnerable to and harmed by male visitors before. She learned a lesson from her past suffering and started to protect her nymphs and her with magic [10]. In her interaction with the suppressive male power, Circe takes her observation as a chance to establish her self-conscious as a female. From the discipline of her father, Circe realizes her current status as a powerless goddess; later, when she faces how her brother gains a superior fate just by his gender, she takes her brother as the other, knowing the necessity of developing power as one of an even more vulnerable group. Finding her place in the mythical world invokes Circe to resist and arm herself, fighting against the suppression of both gods and goddesses, ultimately changing her fate.

2.3 Reframing Characters

Xiao Qing and Circe have similar roles in their myths. They are both inhuman female characters with superpowers and a weakness. Of the weakness, they are ultimately defeated by humans and become part of the motivation of the plots. Traditional myths exaggerate their

identity as inhuman monsters. *Stories to Caution the World* fairly points out Xiao Qing's identity as a snake monster, setting the explosion of her identity as a small climax [11]. *Odyssey* also depicts Circe as a "horrible goddess who can speak human words" [12]. In these myths monsters and goddesses are symbols of unknown nature humans defend than females with colorful personalities. Traditional myths also emphasize the evil nature of Xiao Qing and Circe. In *Odyssey*, Circe is directly depicted as "evil" in her fight with Odysseus [13]. Similarly, Fa Hai, the Buddhist who later defeats Bai and Xiao Qing, describes the sisters as dangerous monsters that will threaten Xu Xian's life [14]. Traditional myths describe the inhuman female characters as the other males, making the two kinds of characters form an opposition between each other.

In the innovative version of the story from Li and Miller's creations, new female protagonists are endowed with independent and solid personalities. Their vulnerability as a female rather than a monster is also emphasized. In *Qingshe*, Xiao Qing knows no rules of human society, and is harmed and fails early when she tries to gain her sister's attention; later, Xiao Qing gradually adapts to the human world, and utilizes her weakness as a female to delude humans like Xu Xian and officers, but is also limited her identity as a female [15]. In *Circe*, Circe also has a weakness as a powerless goddess and female in the society of gods. She is not only suppressed by her father as a powerful male but is also teased by her weak brother as a male. She is even more vulnerable to and is harmed by males when she enters human society [16]. Vulnerability as a female furthers the psychological and physical dilemma Xiao Qing and Circe face in their interaction with the environment. Xiao Qing fails to properly deal with her relationship with Xu Xian and Bai; she also faces the existential crisis caused by Fa Hai [17]. Circe faces a complex relationship with Odysseus; her son and her life are also threatened by Athena as the plot develops [18]. Both stories of Xiao Qing and Circe cease to develop in dilemma in the myths. Inhuman female characters are defeated and suppressed to honor the victory of traditional morality and the advancement of male heroes. Xiao Qing and Bai are ultimately suppressed under a stupa by Buddhists [19]; Circe becomes a helper of Odysseus after being defeated by him [20].

Although they are given superior power by the myths, they are unable to protect themselves and win against males with the power they have.

In the new novels, however, Miller and Li endow female characters with chances to fight and improve while they have their innate vulnerability. Xiao Qing teases humans with her superpower, reveals Xu Xian's cowardice and his cheating on Bai, and fights with Fa Hai to defend Bai and her rights. In the end, the two female characters escape from suppression [21]. Circe continuously fights with suppression from males and discovers her magical power, ultimately exchanging her fate with others and escaping the island [22]. In the new version of the story, Xiao Qing and Circe realize growth and get rid of the crisis. Their change of image and end is an iconization of the new value the novels convey: female character has their own life and values beyond the supporting role as villains; they own independent personalities and power to defend their rights just like males in the past myths do.

3. The Effect of Reframing--Telling a Modern Delimma of Female in a Story of the Past

Both of the novels' original texts were created in ancient eras. *Odyssey* was the creation of ancient Greek society, and *Stories to Caution the World* was written during the Ming Dynasty. The social context and value the plots rely on are based on the old fashion of the ancient Eastern and Western world. *Qingshe* and *Circe* risk traditional values in the original text: *Qingshe* depicts Xiao Qing's desire for affection and love and her rebellion towards the normal role as a docile sister and lover; *Circe* depicts Circe as a puppeteer and witch whose wisdom is even superior to most male characters; both topics are usually ignored in classical myths when it comes to female characters. The two novels are not limited to opposition to the old values of the original text. Based on the familiar plots, the two novels also express modern concerns about the dilemma females face through the female's perspective. In *Qingshe*, Li depicts the disruption of Xiao Qing and Bai's relationship and their peaceful life during their romance with Xu Xian, revealing the latent harm females may face in gender relationships. The different reaction of Xiao Qing and Bai is an analogy of how women in the modern world could defend themselves. The early actions of Xiao Qing and

Bai show how women lose independence and awareness in romantic relationships, ultimately making them more vulnerable. Later, the story also implies a solution: through rationally reflecting on their status and the harm Xu Xian brings, the sisters again unite and defend their safety and rights, escaping from the trap. Miller also expresses her concern about female's vulnerability towards issues like discrimination, rape, and discipline in a patriarchal society. The experience of Circe in Aiaia reflects the authentic dilemma of women who live alone. Showing kindness to strangers may lead to rape. Behaviors and rights are restricted when they are unable to break the social rules and disciplines, just like how Circe is trapped in Aiaia. Circe's actions are an ideal model for modern women: she manages to protect herself by studying and gathering other females. She also rationally recognizes her desire for freedom and dares to pursue it when the chance comes.

Both the story of Xiao Qing and Circe are well-familiar classical texts in modern society. Using plots from these familiar myths helps the reader understand the story's background in a short time. The consensus of background helps the reader further focus on the difference between the new part of the story from the original text, the feelings, and the growth of female protagonists. The authors also lead readers to consider their concerns in issues females face through the perspective of female characters rather than the traditional male narrators or protagonists. Through reflecting on classical plots such as the opposition between Circe and Odysseus, Xiao Qing, and humans, readers can reconsider the most common dilemma of females they are used to in daily life. Although the two novels have similar perspectives and reframing approaches, Li and Miller convey different attitudes toward how females could solve the dilemma. In the last chapter of *Qingshe*, the two main female characters leave the West Lake, get rid of their role as monsters in ancient tales, starting a new life in the modern world. However, although Xiao Qing once expected they could live independently and free from the secular world, and they suffered a lot in their relationship with Xu Xian, the two female characters were ultimately involved in another problematic relationship again. In this end, Li emphasizes the continuity of the problems of the female existing state and gender relations, as

Xiao Qing said to Bai: "You forgot your lesson about Xu Xian, don't you?" [23] Through Xiao Qing's complaint, Li shows readers the continuity of dilemma in the contemporary society, and a negative attitude towards solving the problems. Compared to Li, Miller shows a more optimistic attitude at the end of her novel. In the last chapter of *Circe*, Circe waives her magical power and role as a witch and goddess, gets rid of life in Aiaia, and leaves to freely explore the world. Circe, as a symbol of more women trapped in their current lives, can conquer the difficulties and gain her freedom.

4. Conclusion

The two authors choose the same approach to reframe the story of female characters in myths, though based on distinct cultural backgrounds. Ostensibly, in *Qingshe* and *Circe*, the authors innovate plots, perspectives, and focus, risk the traditional characteristics of females in myths, and create more solid and complicated characters. The innovations enrich the original myths and bring readers a new reading experience. Based on myths as a familiar topic, the two authors also tell stories of female' dilemmas from the perspective of females, invoice the readers to reflect on the dilemmas, not only in the context of ancient myths but also in the context of modern society. Although the two works have limitations in expressing feminism, the combination of myths and feminism still provides a valuable possibility of giving voice to marginalized groups and their issue which have been ignored in traditional narratives.

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