

## Frustration, Boredom, and Fantasy: Augusta Webster's "Circe"

Dorota Osińska

### ABSTRACT

The present article examines how Augusta Webster's dramatic monologue "Circe" (1870), represents the problem of women's boredom, frustration, and fantasy through the reinterpretation of the mythological Greek enchantress Circe. The analysis offers a close reading of the text supported by philosophical, historical, and cultural notions of boredom. Webster's poem functions as an intriguing commentary on how loneliness and hatred towards domesticity are accompanied by growing sexual frustration and even misandry. My reading proposes a fresh look at Webster's work, incorporating a number of critical, mostly feminist, analyses of the poem. Indeed, Webster's "Circe" acts as a provocative glimpse into the psycho-scape of a bored woman who gradually reveals her incessant desires for change and a perfect lover.

### KEYWORDS

Victorian poetry, boredom studies, Augusta Webster, "Circe," revisionist mythology

Nineteenth-century poets took on the mythological Greek enchantress Circe from various vantage points, for example as a mesmerizing witch. Period paintings of her often included cowering men reacting in fear of her insidious and transformative spells. Featured most notably only in one of the minor episodes in *The Odyssey*, the story of Circe nevertheless plays a significant role in many conceptions of the femme fatale trope in Greek mythology as well as the rediscovery of that motif in the nineteenth century. In Homer's epic Circe appears as on the way back from the Trojan War Odysseus visits the island of Aeaea, the place of her residence. Odysseus enters Circe's house and drinks a magic potion she has prepared for him, although its power does not affect the sailor since he is protected by the deity Hermes. When Circe attempts to strike him with her wand, Odysseus threatens her with his sword. Terrified by his reaction, Circe submits to him, swearing that she will not cause any harm to him or his men. What reverberates in the myth is not only the image of seduction, but also the vision of the potential of the destructive female dominance over men.

Specifically throughout the Romantic and Victorian periods, Circe served as an image of the female power which could manifest itself in different ways: to annihilate enemies, direct the actions of others, and otherwise accentuate the putatively transgressive nature of the power of women. While in John Keats's *Endymion* (1818) and the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet "For 'The Wine of Circe' by Edward Burne-Jones" (1870) Circe represents a tantalizing femme fatale whose magic poses a threat to men, the Victorian poetry of the 1860s saw Circe as the embodiment of unorthodox wisdom. For example, in *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), William Morris develops his vision of Circe from the premise of her being a wise woman who warns others (in this case Medea) about the dangers of sacrificing one's independence for domesticity and blind compliance. With a sisterly tenderness, Circe advises Medea to<sup>1</sup>

1 Cf. Florence Boos, "Medea and Circe as 'Wise' Women in the Poetry of William Morris and Augusta Webster," in *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 43–60.

Live then thy life, nor ask for misery,  
 Most certain if thou knewest what must be,  
 And then, at least, this shall not hap to thee,  
 To be like those who people my sad groves,  
 Beneath the moaning of the grey-winged doves.  
 And midst all pain and joy, and right and wrong,  
 Thy name shall be a solace and a song.<sup>2</sup>

Despite representing Circe as a sage, Morris's text also shows her as a witch who entraps sailors, leading them into the dark dens of "cool cloister whence again / They came not forth, but four-foot, rough of mane, / Uncouth with spots, baneful of tooth and claw."<sup>3</sup> Morris demonstrates how Circe can play the role of a supportive sister as well as a dangerous witch who revels in her transmuting powers that can reduce men to animals.

Morris's poem pairing Medea and Circe establishes a feature that is also present in Augusta Webster's poetry collection *Portraits* (1870). Matching these two heroines in *Portraits* reflects how both of them illustrate the perils of female sensuality and relationships with men. This attribute emphasized by Tracy Olverson, who draws a comparison between Medea and Circe, observing that "both women enjoy magical powers beyond male knowledge and mastery; both women conduct sexual relationships with unfaithful men, and both women are abandoned by their lovers in favour of more domestically inclined 'wifely' women."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the unconventional attitudes of Medea and Circe toward their archetypal role of wife and mother remain a chief concern in Victorian revisionist literature. For Helen Luu, Webster's representations of women in *Portraits* exemplify a grotesque femininity based on women's "display of sexual desire and their transgression of maternal, marital, and sexual norms."<sup>5</sup> While both Olverson and Luu are persuasive in their analyses of women in *Portraits*, their readings surprisingly neglect the trope of women's boredom and frustration that arises from the sense of not being appreciated by society for features other than those of wife and mother. In this perspective, Circe's experience of monotony propels her delusions about romance, which ultimately leaves the sorceress empty, disheartened and miserable.

The following article provides a close reading of Augusta Webster's dramatic monologue "Circe" taking into consideration the problem of sexual frustration and boredom. The analysis proposes an image of Circe that serves as the embodiment of putative issues such as weariness with routine, resentment toward men, and the fantasy of a perfect lover. Webster's text functions as a poetic commentary on how loneliness and hatred towards domesticity are accompanied by growing dissatisfaction and misandry. My reading seeks to present a fresh take on Webster's work, notably in dialogue with the critical analyses of the poem by Tracy Olverson in her *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (2010), Helen Luu's article "Freaks of Femininity: Webster's Gallery of Female Grotesques in *Portraits*" (2017), and Christine Sutphin's

2 William Morris, "The Life and Death of Jason, Book XIII," *William Morris Archive*, accessed March 4, 2023, <<http://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/items/show/2303>>.

3 Morris, "The Life and Death of Jason, Book XIII."

4 Tracy Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 32.

5 Helen Luu, "Freaks of Femininity: Webster's Gallery of Female Grotesques in *Portraits*," *Victorian Poetry* 55, no. 1 (2017): 85–103.

“The Representation of Women’s Heterosexual Desire in Augusta Webster’s ‘Circe’ and ‘Medea in Athens’” (1998). Augusta Webster’s poem will be shown here as offering a provocative glimpse into Circe’s psycho-scape which reveals the heroine’s desire to find a perfect lover as well as her struggle with the tediousness of a solitary life.

While themes of boredom permeate throughout the literature of the nineteenth century, the definition of exactly what constitutes boredom in these contexts remain remarkably complex. Over the centuries,<sup>6</sup> numerous artistic, literary and historical accounts have describe different modes of boredom: “*tedium vitae* or *horror loci* (in the Greco-Roman literature), *acedia* (the ‘noonday demon’ mentioned in early Christian texts), *melancholia* made famous by Robert Burton, and *ennui*, a condition briefly fashionable among the eighteenth-century literati.”<sup>7</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Walter Benjamin projected boredom as a mass phenomenon closely linked to modernity itself. As Benjamin describes in *The Arcades Project*, boredom “began to be experienced in epidemic proportions during the 1840s,”<sup>8</sup> providing “a response to the ‘atrophy of experience’ characteristic of mechanised and urbanised social life, being bored raised questions about [the] nineteenth-century subjective experience.”<sup>9</sup> In *A Philosophy of Boredom*, Lars Svendsen depicts the concept as often misunderstood and no longer fashionable for artists and thinkers, since

[b]oredom lacks the charm of melancholy – a charm that is connected to melancholy’s traditional link to wisdom, sensitivity and beauty. For that reason, boredom is less attractive to aesthetes. It also lacks the obvious seriousness of depression, so it is less interesting to psychologists and psychiatrists.<sup>10</sup>

Svendsen also links boredom fundamentally with modernity and the increasing focus in the past few centuries on “more stimuli, more individuality and more abstract personality.”<sup>11</sup> Modern individuals “valorize [...] the notion of perpetual self-actualisation, in which every aspect of our choices and actions must have valid personal worth.”<sup>12</sup> In short, boredom and subjectivity are inseparable, and the trope of individualism beginning in Romanticism may itself propel the sense of dullness and frustration.<sup>13</sup> Svendsen proposes three types: situational boredom associated with routine, “the boredom of satiety” evoked when “one gets too much of the same thing and

6 Cf. Michael E. Gardiner and Julian Jason Haladyn, *Boredom Studies Reader. Frameworks and Perspectives*. (London: Routledge, 2017), 4–11.

7 Gardiner and Haladyn, *Boredom Studies Reader. Frameworks and Perspectives*, 4.

8 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1999), 108.

9 Gardiner and Haladyn, *Boredom Studies Reader. Frameworks and Perspectives*, 5.

10 Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, transl. John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 19–20.

11 Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 46.

12 Gardiner and Haladyn, *Boredom Studies Reader. Frameworks and Perspectives*, 15.

13 Describing the relationship between Romanticism and boredom, Svendsen cites Hegel’s criticism of Romantic irony: “Whatever is, is only by the instrumentality of the ego, and whatever exists by my instrumentality I can equally well annihilate again. Now if we stop at these absolutely empty forms which originate from the absoluteness of the abstract ego, nothing is treated in and for itself and as valuable in itself, but only as produced by the subjectivity of the ego. But in that case the ego can be lord and master of everything” (qtd. in Svendsen 2008, 59). Svendsen uses this passage to indicate the ultimate problem with boredom, the loss of meaning: “if it is up to me to ascribe or deny significance and value at will, these things will lose their value and significance, because these are now not inherent in the things themselves and thus become empty. Because there is no substantial distinction between the significant and the insignificant, everything becomes equally interesting and as a result equally boring” (2008, 59–60).

everything becomes banal," and existential boredom "where the soul is without content and the world is in neutral."<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to Svendsen's understanding of boredom as a by-product of subjectivity, in Adam Phillips's *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, tedium and monotony may have a positive impact on the individual which leads to a "state of suspended animation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire."<sup>15</sup> In this light, boredom is framed as the moment of progressive anticipation. To counterbalance that constructive view, Phillips also mentions that, at some point, "the boredom will turn into waiting" and "boredom needs to be the more permanent suspended animation of desire."<sup>16</sup> Thus, this sense of constant postponement and thwarted expectations subsequently constitute the very identity of the individual. In a similar spirit, Lee Anna Maynard proposes the term "solid boredom," which refers to the "construction of the boredom to protect the individual from her [or his] own desires or other's actions," noting that boredom is associated also with "the mourning of the disappointment of everyday life [...], the acknowledgement of the possibility of a desire [...] and a disguise for less acceptable emotions, such as rage."<sup>17</sup>

All of these features of boredom are displayed in Webster's "Circe," a work which may serve as a valuable starting point in a discussion of the representation of a woman struggling with a life lived in solitude. In the beginning of the poem, the focus is not fully on the protagonist, but on the landscape, signaling a slight departure from the content of Webster's typical opening lines. Webster generally initiates her dramatic monologues with a long description of the emotional turmoil of her characters, yet here the speaking "I" Circe is observing herself as if from a distance. As suggested in line two, "darkness has raised her arms to draw him down," the sorceress appears dissociated from the voice of the speaking persona. It is crucial to recognize that the speaker is here hinted at in one line only. The strategy Webster applies in "Circe" is akin to what Robert Browning did in his early dramatic monologue "Porphyria's Lover" (1842), that is, employing landscape imagery to unfold the mental state of the main protagonist. Such a divergence from her standard writing style shows Webster's subtle experimentation with revisionist tropes as well as with the form of the dramatic monologue.

The first line sets the scene of the whole monologue: the sun sets at the sea and "the smooth waves grow sullen,"<sup>18</sup> echoing an aura of despondency also present in the second line of Browning's "Porphyria's Lover."<sup>19</sup> The opening stanza contains a troubling yet compelling personification of the seascape and a garden. Initially, the descriptions of water mirror Circe's emotions: the calm

14 Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 40–41.

15 Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 68.

16 Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, 78.

17 Lee Anna Maynard, *Beautiful Boredom: Idleness and Feminine Self-Realization in the Victorian Novel* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland, 2009), 10.

18 Augusta Webster, "Circe" *Portraits* (London: Macmillan and Co. 1870), l. 5.

19 Cf. Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," "The sullen wind was soon awake" (l. 2).

waters of the sea are unbearable for her,<sup>20</sup> and the “lurid” setting of the sun marks the end of a day in no way different from any other; the “low dull thunder rolls along the beach”<sup>21</sup> is a sound image suggesting the oppressive repetitiveness and exhaustion that Circe experiences. What she desires is a “storm, at last, storm, glorious storm,”<sup>22</sup> yearning for elemental destruction as an escape rope from the boredom on the island. Circe welcomes the impending doom and disaster which will bring for her change and transformation.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, the marine imagery slowly transforms into figures connected with gardens and harvesting. Although Circe conjures up the fecundity, the greenery is marked by associations with abuse and destruction:

Oh welcome, welcome, though it rend my bowers,  
scattering my blossomed roses like the dust,  
splitting the shrieking branches, tossing down  
my riotous vines with their young half-tinged grapes.<sup>24</sup>

The visions of “rending [the] bowers,” “scattering [the] blossomed roses,” “splitting the branches,” and “tossing down [the] riotous vines” rest on the images of invasion, rape, or as Tracy Olverson describes the scene, “the ring of violent sexual conquest.”<sup>25</sup> Essentially, Circe’s land is conquered and torn apart. Yet, this poses no threat to her personally – she asks dryly if this indeed matters at all.<sup>26</sup> Strangely enough, Circe refuses to be affected by the devastation of her land, as what she truly desires is an escape from frustration and boredom.

Circe’s weariness on the island changes to the “rhythmical, sexualised nature of Circe’s language and imagery.”<sup>27</sup> Line 31 in particular marks this shift – while initially, Circe essentially hints at her predicament, later she expresses openly and straightforwardly her need for variety:

let it come and bring me change,  
breaking the sickly sweet monotony.  
I am too weary of this long bright calm;  
always the same blue sky, always the sea  
the same blue perfect likeness of the sky,  
one rose to match the other that has waned,  
to-morrow’s dawn the twin of yesterday’s;  
and every night the ceaseless crickets chirp  
the same long joy and the late strain of birds  
repeats their strain of all the even month...<sup>28</sup>

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20 Webster, “Circe,” l. 5.

21 Webster, “Circe,” l. 9.

22 Webster, “Circe,” l. 10.

23 Webster, “Circe,” l. 11.

24 Webster, “Circe,” ll. 11–14.

25 Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism*, 49.

26 Webster, “Circe,” l. 31.

27 Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism*, 49.

28 Webster, “Circe,” ll. 31–40.

What Circe longs for are a radical change in routine and relief from everyday banality, or as Svendsen terms these phenomena, situational boredom and the boredom of satiety, respectively. She has grown exasperated from all the monotony, which for her seems "sickly sweet,"<sup>29</sup> indicating a conflicting attitude towards her predicament as both insufferable as well as superficially pleasant. Although she may cherish the landscape, the beauty of the terrain remains dull and static, leaving no room for the freshness and excitement which will come with the unknown. The extended passage cited above may serve as an expressive example of how young women of the Victorian era yearned for something other than domesticity, and how they demanded "the right of experience."<sup>30</sup>

Tellingly, Circe's downgrade to "a woman, not a god"<sup>31</sup> proves Webster's awareness of how boredom affected women who believed they were confined to the ideology of the Angel in the House. In her 1911 long socialist essay *Woman and Labour*, the New Woman and political activist Olive Schreiner wrote that with the expansion of a patriarchal industrialization, middle- and upper-middle-class women now suffered from "morbid inactivity."<sup>32</sup> For Schreiner, this meant that boredom was a by-product of the technological and ideological changes in the Victorian period which negatively impacted the conditions of middle-class women who continued to be forced to remain within the confines of their homes. In a similar spirit, Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra* (1852) illustrates how mental illnesses among women "could be the result of mental atrophy and moral starvation within the most benevolent home."<sup>33</sup> Elaine Showalter argues that "the female malady" was common due to women's lack of meaningful purpose in life, a putative condition exacerbated by middle-class "boredom, repression, and vacuity."<sup>34</sup>

Accordingly, women who experienced boredom felt forced to confront the creation of their own identities. In *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom*, Allison Pease writes that in modernist literature the bored woman "fails to make meaning because her status as an individual is tenuous at best."<sup>35</sup> This view might also be applied to women as a social group:

Complicating the politics of individualism, British feminists in the early decades of the twentieth century worked to eradicate the illusion that female boredom was a singular, subjective experience, and instead strove to demonstrate the ways in which women's lack of equality and their conditioning into passivity lead to an emptiness of experience for women as a group. At the same time they were identifying women's lack of individuality, they were creating it.<sup>36</sup>

For Pease, while the experience of boredom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century extended beyond general individual subjectivity, a sense of boredom in particular permeated female communities. In contrast, Svendsen argues for the prevalence of the individual approach to boredom:

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29 Webster, "Circe," l. 32.

30 Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism*, 50.

31 Webster, "Circe," l. 65.

32 Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911), 49.

33 Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 62.

34 Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 64.

35 Allison Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7-8.

36 Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom*, 8.

Boredom presupposes subjectivity, i.e., self-awareness. Subjectivity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for boredom. To be able to be bored the subject must be able to perceive himself as an individual that can enter into various meaning contexts, and this subject demands meaning of the world and himself.<sup>37</sup>

As developed in Webster's text, the physical solitude of being trapped on the island and the mental anguish caused by pervading monotony force Circe to admit that she "know[s] nought of peace, and ha[s] not loved."<sup>38</sup> This realization triggers a sense of self-scrutiny and the gradual recognition of her needs. Contrary to modernist writers, Webster's portrayal of Circe as a bored woman remains individualized, without an overt criticism of the Angel in the House and without extending it into a social discussion on the situation of female middle-class communities. What matters in the poem is Circe's personal recognition of the frustration and existential boredom triggered by the solitary life on the island.

While Luu reads the poem as "the picture of complete subordination and subjugation [that] captures precisely the social and legal position of women in a Victorian marriage,"<sup>39</sup> the poem also shows a manipulative side of Circe. On the one hand, the monologue is dominated by a languorous sense of anticipation of change along with Circe's continual self-examination in the light of a potential affair; on the other hand, perhaps strikingly, Circe reasserts her sense of superiority, as she comes to claim that nobody has ever proved worthy of her. She perpetually constructs fantasies and dilemmas about her ideal suitor:

if now in the world  
 he sought me who will seek me—Oh ye gods  
 will he not seek me? Is it all a dream?  
 will there be never never such a man?  
 will there be only these, these bestial things  
 who wallow in my styes, or mop and mow  
 among the trees, or munch in pens and byres,  
 or snarl and filch behind their wattled coops;  
 these things who had believed that they were men?<sup>40</sup>

It appears that Circe's self-scrutiny is triggered by several questions that are left without answer. Firstly, she asks herself whether she is isolated because of her exile, or could her exile also mean liberation from social constraints.<sup>41</sup> Following this, she ponders whether she is inherently unlovable ("dwell, like a lonely god, in a charmed isle / where I am first and only, and, like one / who should love poisonous savours more than mead")<sup>42</sup> because of her physical disconnection

37 Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 32.

38 Webster, "Circe," l. 71.

39 Luu, "Freaks of Femininity: Webster's Gallery of Female Grotesques in *Portraits*," 99.

40 Webster, "Circe," ll. 90–98.

41 Webster, "Circe," ll. 72–78.

42 Webster, "Circe," ll. 60–62.

from other people,<sup>43</sup> or if there are other reasons for her loneliness.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, these questions touch upon the issue of whether her powers of turning men into swine have any other purpose than to shame them.<sup>45</sup> It would seem that Circe questions her magical agency, considering whether her spells only reveal the true nature of men, or perhaps she changes men into beasts because she wants them to be humiliated. Olverson takes a more sympathetic stance, recognizing that:

According to Circe, it is the men themselves who are responsible for their brutal metamorphoses (lines 188–93). The wine in Circe's Cup of Truth is not transformative, merely revealing. We must therefore conclude that the men have been corrupted, not by feminine wiles, but by their own bestial desires and values. Among her assembly of beasts, there is not 'one true right man', whom Circe would consider as a lover. And so she waits for a man with the necessary moral and intellectual strength who can withstand her simple personality test.<sup>46</sup>

Webster's Circe maintains that the woman's powers as a witch may be destructive only for those men whose brutality hides underneath the façade of power. By testing men through her magical "cup of Truth,"<sup>47</sup> Circe admits that perhaps she may be cruel,<sup>48</sup> yet in the pursuit of a perfect lover she is willing to sacrifice other men whom she deems unworthy of her.

Nevertheless, Circe's assessment of men is extremely polarizing, as she draws a clear line between the perfect human (as she projects herself), and the bestiality of men, who are contemptible. She sees men merely as brutes who "will strike and bicker," "swell with puffed up greatness," "gibe and strut in apish pranks," "will grow mad with fever of the wine," "will sluggishly besot himself." They are "lewd" and "gluttonous," thus she proclaims that she "shall loathe them all."<sup>49</sup> Overall, the image of masculinity she draws is characterized by theft, fighting, drinking, obscenity, and gluttony. As a result, Circe makes a distinction between Circe-the-great and men with "the beast in them," "with their poor sorts of love."<sup>50</sup> At the end of the monologue, Circe unequivocally sums up men as animals and "sensual brutes / that shame the Earth that bore them, these they are."<sup>51</sup> In fact, while her portrayal might resemble a demanding princess waiting for her Prince Charming, it is worth noting that Circe's authoritative voice emphasizes a contempt for masculinity propelled by aggression and violence. According to Olverson, "Circe holds these men accountable to the same impossibly high standards to which women are conventionally held and finds the men sadly wanting."<sup>52</sup> Similarly to Morris's depiction, Webster's representation of the witch may serve as a warning to other women about the consequences of an ill-conceived male authority that may turn into cruelty and savagery.

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43 Webster, "Circe," ll. 11–32.

44 Webster, "Circe," ll. 91–102.

45 Webster, "Circe," ll. 103–114.

46 Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism*, 52; Cf. Madeline Miller, *Circe* (New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2018).

47 Webster, "Circe," l. 173.

48 Webster, "Circe," l. 178.

49 Webster, "Circe," ll. 161–169.

50 Webster, "Circe," l. 160, l. 181.

51 Webster, "Circe," ll. 196–199.

52 Olverson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism*, 52.



Indeed, Webster's Circe remains a strangely ambiguous character who, despite her contempt towards brutes, imagines her perfect lover and candidly expresses her desires towards him. As Christine Sutphin argues, comparing the gathering storm at the beginning of the poem with the growing sexual frustration, Circe is an openly sexual woman who is tired of waiting for her lover.<sup>53</sup> Despite being overwhelmed by the never-ending cycle of boredom,<sup>54</sup> Circe's preoccupation with her own sexual needs becomes clearly articulated, and she defies the clear-cut division between fallen sexuality and the purity of a perfect Victorian woman.<sup>55</sup> Although Circe relentlessly searches for affection and awaits the arrival of her lover,<sup>56</sup> she expresses no desire to become a wife or a mother. What appears intriguing is how Webster plays with the convention of a male gaze, reversing it into a female one. In her dramatic monologue, it is Circe who imagines the details of her lover:

Oh sunlike glory of pale glittering hairs,  
 bright as the filmy wires my weavers take  
 to make me golden gauzes; oh deep eyes,  
 darker and softer than the bluest dusk  
 of August violets, darker and deep  
 like crystal fathomless lakes in summer noons;  
 oh sad sweet longing smile; oh lips that tempt  
 my very self to kisses; oh round cheeks,  
 tenderly radiant with the even flush  
 of pale smoothed coral; perfect lovely face  
 answering my gaze from out this fleckless pool;  
 wonder of glossy shoulders, chiselled limbs;  
 should I be so your lover as I am,  
 drinking an exquisite joy to watch you thus  
 in all a hundred changes through the day,  
 but that I love you for him till he comes,  
 but that my beauty means his loving it?<sup>57</sup>

Circe fantasizes about her perfect suitor minutely outlining all the nuances of his "deep eyes," "lips that tempt," "glossy shoulders, chiselled limbs,"<sup>58</sup> thus becoming the active agent of desire, not the recipient of it. Such a characterization resembles an ekphrastic description of a beautifully created statue, not a human being with natural imperfections. Circe confesses that she is intoxicated by his dreamlike appearance, emphasizing that he is "an exquisite joy to watch."<sup>59</sup> Such a reading may suggest that in the complexity of her created fantasy, her lover is equally beautiful and objectified, which consequently further amplifies Circe's sense of dominance, control and power over men.

53 Christine Sutphin, "The Representation of Women's Heterosexual Desire in Augusta Webster's 'Circe' and 'Medea in Athens'" *Women's Writing* 5, no. 3 (1998): 374.

54 Webster, "Circe," ll. 45–48.

55 Sutphin, "The Representation of Women's Heterosexual Desire," 374; Luu, "Freaks of Femininity," 85.

56 Webster, "Circe," ll. 85–88.

57 Webster, "Circe," ll. 115–131.

58 Webster, "Circe," l. 117, l. 121, l. 126.

59 Webster, "Circe," l. 128.

Appropriately, Webster does not represent Circe as a victim of circumstance, but as an active agent in the intricately woven romantic fantasy. Christine Sutphin categorizes Circe's behavior as deeply narcissistic, even self-erotic:

Although she longs for a male lover, she experiences a kind of auto-eroticism, describing her own physical perfections with loving detail: "Oh, lips that tempt / my very self to kisses" (120–121). In fact, she says that she is the lover of her own image, even though she claims to love her beauty "for him till he comes" (129). This may sound like the narcissism exhibited by more conventional characters in Victorian literature, but Circe is her own lover because no one else has proved worthy. She argues that she should be loved, not only because she is beautiful, but because she is "marvellously minded, and with sight / Which flashes suddenly on hidden things, / As the gods see, who do not need to look" (99–101). So far, no man has been her superior or equal. She is far too good for the "pigs."<sup>60</sup>

Sutphin points out that the description of the lover not only shows Circe's longing for a perfect suitor, but it betrays the self-righteousness of the enchantress in her choice of partner. Simply put, nobody is – or possibly could ever be – good enough for her. Such interpretation may open up a new perspective on the role of agency in articulating female desire, and Webster's descriptions do not go as far as to assent to the 20<sup>th</sup> century polarization of women's sexuality in diametrical opposition to that of men. Still, the poem does not shy away from this theme in its radical shift of period conventions by representing a woman who is not content to remain the object of desire, projecting herself as the active creator of sexual power.<sup>61</sup>

While the majority of the text addresses Circe's longing for change and her sexual frustration, Webster ends the monologue before Odysseus arrives at Aea. In the situation of the suspended narrative, Circe's predicament has no resolution, thus the myth of romance will be forever deferred or even dismantled.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, what Webster offers is the vision of a sorceress who, while undisturbed by other protagonists, seems trapped inside the workings of her own mind and the body. Despite her occult magic and knowledge, Circe is foremost a woman, one led by desires and fantasies, with delusions about love, beauty, and relationships. Although she articulates her needs in a very open manner, the poem's ending signifies Circe's constant undulation between boredom and all-pervasive narcissism, enhanced by the ambivalence of romance.

Above all, Webster's "Circe" encapsulates all three types of boredom mentioned by Svendsen: the routine on the island is slowly killing the goddess; Circe has had enough of the beautiful landscape because it is constantly there and it never changes. More importantly, while she waits for her suitor to arrive at the island, her existential boredom comes to the fore: Circe can find no other meaning apart from finding the perfect lover. The suspenseful, anticipatory even anti-climactic ending of the poem<sup>63</sup> intensifies the sense of frustration that grows with boredom: like Circe herself, we are also suspended in ignorance about her fate. While Webster's 1870 rendition examines Circe's psycho-scape of dullness and sexual discontentment, the late-Victorian poets returned to the fleshly depictions of the sorceress, highlighting primarily her perilous influence

60 Sutphin, "The Representation of Women's Heterosexual Desire," 382.

61 Sutphin, "The Representation of Women's Heterosexual Desire," 382.

62 Sutphin, "The Representation of Women's Heterosexual Desire," 383.

63 Webster, "Circe," l. 211.

on men. With the advent of the decadent movement in nineteenth-century literature, Circe once again became the embodiment of sensual dissatisfaction and voluptuous intoxication.

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**Dorota Osińska** is a PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of Humanities, Institute of English Studies at University of Warsaw. Her main research interest centers on 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century British literature and culture with a focus on Victorian poetry and art, the Pre-Raphaelites, and British Aestheticism. She has published articles on Victorian poetry, nineteenth-century women writers, and revisionist poetry.