

Homer's Odyssey: Kirke's Characterization

© Mark Mantho

What kind of goddess/lady/monster is Kirke? As Homer represents her, she's an evil witch who beguiles and entraps honorable men through the use of magic and simple trickery -- one of the quintessential "serpents" of the *Odyssey*.

The very attributes and behavior that Kirke initially displays to the first party of men who meet her are precisely the characteristics which ensnare them. She's beautiful and seemingly demure; a pretty girl singing songs and weaving "ambrosial fabric" at a loom who constitutes no apparent threat whatsoever. Hence, Kirke appears at first glance to embody all of the wholesome traits a typical maiden might possess, expected characteristics familiar to the Greek men in the story. As we know, however, their assumptions would prove a grave miscalculation.

Calling them into her abode, Kirke plays the gracious hostess to perfection. Seating the unsuspecting Argives on thrones and lounging chairs, the witch prepares food and wine. This too the Greek soldiers would have expected, merely another aspect of good hospitality on the part of their hostess. What they *didn't* expect was to be drugged, with Kirke "adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose desire or thought of their father land." Yet that's exactly what happens: scarcely have they imbibed when she takes after the soldiers with a stick, changing them into swine and herding them, squealing, toward a pigsty. There she pens them up, feeding them acorns, mast, and cornel berries -- "fodder for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth."

The reason these gentlemen end up as they do, at least temporally, is that as Greeks firmly rooted in the ethos of a patriarchal society, it simply didn't occur to them that a *woman* (an "inferior" in their eyes) could be capable of such treachery. Her actions "pervert the natural order of things." From a contemporary perspective, we might assume that as experienced warriors these characters

would be wary regardless, but their naive acceptance of the female Kirke's "hospitality" is indicative of the way Greeks typically viewed the role of women.

It's significant therefore that the magical powers which Kirke possesses mirror and exaggerate Greek beliefs and anxieties about the abilities ascribed to females; namely, the capacity to bewitch and waylay men through sexual seduction. You could argue, for example, that the drug Kirke utilizes to lull the soldiers' minds' is analogous to using "feminine wiles" to achieve her ends. What underlies the details of Homer's account of the fate of Odysseus' men in this instance (like the previous tale of Agamemnon's unfaithful wife and the sirens that follow) is a pronounced fear of being hoodwinked and led down the path to death by scheming females.

Indeed, when Kirke attempts to persuade Odysseus to make love to her, the hero is incredulous, saying, "Here in this house you turned my men into swine; now it is I myself you hold, enticing into your chamber, to your dangerous bed, to take my manhood when you have me stripped." He then makes her promise that if they *do* go to bed, she'll "work no enchantment to my harm," ever vigilant lest she employ yet another ruse. Even after they do the deed, Odysseus adamantly insists on the release of his men and their transformation back into original form before he agrees to partake of the feast Kirke has laid before him. The fact that she accedes to every one of his demands connotes, symbolically, a "restoration" of natural order -- at least as Homer perceived it.

(*One wonders what Freud would have made of Homer's woman-turns-men-into-pigs riff. And while for the purpose of the story Odysseus' remark to Kirke about "taking my manhood when you have me stripped" refers to her ability to turn him into an animal, I suppose another, more psychoanalytic reading of his reaction could suffice just as well...)