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"Circe": The Rhetoric of Drama

The rambunctious pantomimic skits of "Cyclops" and the role playing and scene changes in "Oxen of the Sun" are the closest we have come in Ulysses to the drama of "Circe." In these two earlier chapters, imitation, impersonation, and rhetorical flamboyance are narrative principles; the role playing of the characters is a function of the general pomp and ceremony of narrative style.

Impersonation and rhetorical excess also characterize "Circe," but the convention of the chapter is that it is a dramatic script rather than a narrative. The staginess of the narrative in the preceding chapters yields to a stage, as everything is acted out instead of mediated through narration. The oratory of English prose styles gives way to a new kind of rhetorical extremism, integrally related to the dreamlike quality of the chapter. This extremism depends upon two dominant rhetorical modes: metaphoric substitution and hyperbole.

The entire chapter is, in a radical sense, figurative: its fantastic scenes and dialogues function as dramatized conceits or metaphors for the characters’ suppressed desires, fears, and guilt. In "Circe," as in a dream, metaphoric substitution operates as a basic principle. But what is radical about the treatment of dream symbolism in the chapter is its dramatic and literal presentation: that which is private and internalized in a dream becomes public spectacle, as metaphors for feelings become literal actors on the stage. And, as in a dream, the figures are presented with extravagance and exaggeration. In the dramatic context of the
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chapter, this extravagance is manifested in the broad gestures of vaudeville and burlesque. Hidden feelings are not merely acted out in disguised form—they are overacted. This symbolic, indeed hyperbolic, projection of feelings contributes to the "pathopoëia" of the chapter, a rhetorical term for pathos making—emotional, hyperbolic expression in speech and gesture. In "Circe," characters and objects alike orate, exhort, and mimic.

I will say much more about the rhetoric of the Circean drama, particularly the dominance of metaphor and hyperbole in the chapter, but first I want to trace briefly some of the antecedents of the theatrics we find there. The roots of the Circean drama can be found in both the stream-of-consciousness of the characters and the narrative style in earlier chapters. For example, the kind of drama staged in "Circe" is adumbrated in two passages of "Wandering Rocks," in which the characters give free rein to their imaginations. The first describes Bloom at the bookstall, reading a passage from *Sweets of Sin*:

He read where his finger opened.
—*All the dollarbills her husband gave her were spent in the stores on wondrous gowns and costliest frillies. For him! For Raoul!*

—*Yes. This. Here. Try. . . .
—You are late, he spoke hoarsely, eyeing her with a suspicious glare. The beautiful woman threw off her sable-trimmed wrap, displaying her queenly shoulders and heaving embonpoint. . . .

Mr Bloom read again: *The beautiful woman.*


We move from Bloom reading, "flesh cowed," to Bloom
cheerleading for Raoul as he will be for Boylan in "Circe." Bloom's imagination embellishes the pornographic scene from the book. His reverie brings us to the borderline between stream-of-consciousness and dramatized fantasy. This particular fantasy is transformed in "Circe": the sable-trimmed wrap appears on the shoulders of Mrs Yelverton Barry, one of the fantasied sadistic women of "Circe" (p. 465); Molly (Marion), in her "pelt," addresses Boylan as "Raoul" (p. 565); and the smells and sweat that Bloom pictures as the "Sweets of Sin" abound in the sadomasochistic drama. (Even the emotional excess is adumbrated in "Wandering Rocks," when Bloom is so carried away by the vision that he has "trouble" mastering his breath to say that he wishes to buy the book.)

Stephen, too, indulges in fantasies that anticipate the drama of the later chapter. For example, he gazes through the lapidary's window: "She dances in a foul gloom where gum burns with garlic. . . . She dances, capers, wagging her sowish haunches and her hips, on her gross belly flapping a ruby egg" (p. 241). Like Bloom's fantasy, Stephen's anticipates the lurid drama of "Circe." In the later chapter, however, these kinds of images appear with a difference: the present tense that signals a fantasy in the earlier chapter appears instead in the actual stage directions for the drama; and a descriptive phrase like "sowish haunches" gives way to symbolic transformation. In "Circe," instead of the "sowish haunches" in Stephen's imagination, we find Bella raising her hoof and placing it on Bloom. Simile gives way to literal representation, as human characters are transformed into animals.

By the time we get to "Circe," then, two important changes have occurred. First, impressionism is replaced by expressionism: imaginative coloration of the landscape is no longer tied to the private point of view of a particular character. It is, rather, both communal and externalized. Whole landscapes and situations symbolically express feelings and sensations: the Nighttown setting given at the beginning
of the chapter, before the appearance of any character, is a general projection of the murky, clandestine, sordid world of the unconscious to be charted in the chapter as a whole. The setting is thus the externalization of the unconscious—a stage set which need not conform to the norms of naturalistic representation but which nevertheless gives materiality and substance to fear and desire. With its “danger signals,” “skeleton tracks,” and “stunted men and women,” Nighttown is both the literal setting of the plot of the chapter and the expressionistic equivalent of the feelings of guilt and trespass that are experienced by the characters.

Second, analogy gives way to dramatized conceit. The transformations in “Circe” are bizarre and literal extensions of the figurative language in the narration of the earlier chapters. These preceding chapters are replete with somewhat strange metaphoric descriptions of characters and landscapes that anticipate the dramatized conceits of “Circe.” For example, in the “Aeolus” chapter (which has no thematic relation to animals), the use of animal metaphors suddenly turns the newspaper office into a virtual barnyard: “An instant after a hoarse bark of laughter burst over professor MacHugh’s unshaven black-spectacled face”; “The inner door was opened violently and a scarlet beaked face, crested by a comb of feathery hair, thrust itself in” (p. 126).1

In fact, even the animation of objects like hooves, fans, and buttons can be regarded as an extreme version of earlier narrative tendencies, specifically, of the strange use of synecdoche in the narrative of “Wandering Rocks” and “Sirens,” chapters in which the breakdown of the initial style occurs. Bloom follows the bag of Richie Goulding into the restaurant in “Sirens”: “The bag of Goulding, Collis, Ward led Bloom by ryebloom flowered tables” (p. 266). If this bag can lead Bloom into the bar in “Sirens,” why can’t Bella Cohen’s fan lead him on in “Circe”? Similarly, the sturdy

1 Ann Rafferty and Fern Chertkow first made me aware of the presence of these metaphors in “Aeolus.”

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trousers that salute the viceregal procession at the end of “Wandering Rocks” (p. 255) anticipate the gesturing objects of “Circe.”

Thus, the roots of the Circean drama are found in the impressionism of the characters’ view of the world and the rhetorical habits of the third-person narration in the earlier chapters. The play staged in “Circe” is an extension of the play of language earlier on. In fact, both the stage directions and the role playing in the chapter are anticipated in the staginess of the naive narrative style of “Telemachus,” with its clear demarcation of action and style of action: “Stephen said with energy and growing fear” (p. 4), “Buck Mulligan cried with delight” (p. 11), “Buck Mulligan’s gowned form moved briskly about the hearth to and fro” (p. 11). The naive style gives us dialogue or action and the style of performance (for example, with fear, quickly, merrily); the stage directions, too, tell us about the style and gesture accompanying the action. In the “Hades” chapter, this dramatic notation continues in a different vein: “All waited. . . . All waited. . . . They waited still” (p. 87); “All watched awhile through their windows caps and hats lifted by passers” (p. 88); “All raised their thighs” (p. 89); “All walked after” (p. 101). This chorus of actions, transposed into the present tense, resembles the stage directions of “Circe,” and the sense of orchestration and of characters put through their paces anticipates the directorial mode of the chapter. Finally, in “Scylla and Charybdis,” the narrative briefly gives way to dramatic script, an extension of the general staginess of both the language of narration and the resident literary critics (especially Stephen).

This brief glance backward is meant not only to illustrate the continuity among the chapters but to establish that the “Circe” chapter provides a release of certain energies that have emerged earlier in the text in milder, tamer form. Thus, what is true for the characters is true for the book in a larger sense: all kinds of suppressed energies, narrative as well as psychological, are tapped in this antic chapter. “Circe” pro-
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vides a stage for a libidinous release of tendencies in the language and in the characters. The chapter’s general carnivale atmosphere, with its puns, wisecracks, and burlesque, represents the dramatic eruption of the unconscious of the characters and of rhetorical energies in the language. The book’s previously suppressed or “censored” material now surfaces. The offstage and “ob-scene” are now spotlighted—scenes merely hinted at previously are now given center stage. Exhibitionism abounds in the gestures of the language and the characters.

It is through the mechanism of the dream that the link between the rhetorical extremism of the chapter and the dramatic representation of the characters’ hidden feelings is forged. Many critics have observed that there is much of dream logic and mechanism in the chapter. As in a dream, in which the unconscious communicates in disguised forms, in “Circe,” scenes, dialogue, even the stage directions, function as metaphors for the characters’ feelings. Metaphoric substitution, synecdoche, hyperbole abound precisely because, as Freud and, recently, Jacques Lacan have shown, the dream communicates by means of rhetorical figures. In “Circe,” it is as if the book itself were staging dreams for the characters by means of symbol and verbal and visual play. The dramatic script brims over with signs to be deciphered; even the italicized names of the speakers (that is, MARION instead of Molly) are symbols of hidden feelings.

It is important to stress that the “dream of the text” is not equivalent to the fantasies or dreams of the characters.


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For the psychological boundaries of the characters’ minds are wildly, extravagantly transgressed in the chapter; that is, the narrative memory of the book provides the resources for this extraordinary drama, often in violation of the actual memories and associations of the characters. Motifs from different chapters appear in new forms to reveal something about the characters: Black Liz, straight from her appearance in a parody in “Cyclops” materializes in “Circe” to show how henpecked and motherly Bloom is. According to the stage directions, Bloom feels his “occiput,” dubiously, “with the unparalleled embarrassment of a harassed pedlar gauging the symmetry of her [Zoe’s] peeled pears” (p. 500), a line that refers us back to the spelling bee conundrum offered in “Aeolus.” Kitty, the whore, appears, cloaked in the style of Gerty MacDowell: “Kitty unpins her hat. . . . And a prettier, a daintier head of winsome curls was never seen on a whore’s shoulders” (p. 521). As in a dream, the elements of the past reappear in new forms, often severed from the context that would explain them, but it is the book’s past that provides the material for the drama.

Thus, as C. H. Peake has observed, we are by no means given “filmed records” of the unconscious. Instead, we have the book staging dramas for the reader that could not exist in their present form in the conscious minds or dreams of the characters. The distorted, composite dramas of “Circe” afford the reader yet another look at the possibilities lodged within the characters and the world of Dublin. Like the other distortions or “misconceptions” provided in the book’s second half—the “static” in “Sirens” or the masquerades in “Cyclops” and “Oxen”—the bizarre speeches and actions of “Circe” reveal to the reader further aspects of the characters. “A man of genius,” Stephen says, “makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery” (p.

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190). The distortions of "Circe" are "portals of discovery" for the reader. The curtain rises.

The material that we discover in "Circe" differs from that in previous chapters, however, because of its deeply sensitive nature. In "Circe" it is as if we dive into the ellipses of the stream-of-consciousness passages of the early chapters. We see the fears, wishes, and guilty feelings that the characters have tried all day to suppress. "Circe" symbolically dramatizes those painful thoughts that we have learned of obliquely, by means of the characters' avoidance or narrative omission. All day long Bloom has been troubled by the crucial events relating to three primary relationships in his life: his father's suicide, his son's death at eleven days old, and his wife's adultery. When thoughts of these events come to Bloom's mind, he tries to repress them, and the narrative, obligingly, complies. The concept of the stream-of-consciousness is honored; if the character represses a painful thought or memory, we see the act of repression but cannot look through him to what lies beneath. The text stays with Bloom in the Ormond Hotel rather than shifting the scene to 7 Eccles Street. Only verbal echoes—the haunting refrain "at four" and the jingle of Boylan's car—remind us of what is occurring.

But in "Circe," primarily through symbolic dialogues, Bloom and Stephen are made to play out scenes that express and make public these hidden feelings. The omitted is now committed. These latent feelings include their desires and need for approval (for example, Bloom's stint as Lord Mayor of Dublin), their guilt and need for punishment (for example, Mrs Yelverton Barry's accusations). Although the naturalistic action progresses in the chapter—Bloom and Stephen visit Bella Cohen's brothel, Stephen loses his money and self-control, and Bloom comes to the rescue—most of the chapter is taken up with the public dramatization of the kinds of internal conflicts that we have seen the characters suffer in private all day long.

Many of the dramatized scenes in the chapter involve
elements from the characters’ pasts. In fact, the dialogue spoken and the roles played in the chapter differ in this respect, too, from those in “Cyclops” and “Oxen of the Sun,” both chapters in which, for the most part, present scenes and conversations among the characters are written according to the conventions of a particular style. In “Circe,” the “sins of the past” are recapitulated; the characters’ spoken confrontations with specters from their pasts symbolize the inescapable relationship between past and present. We have seen the psychic wounds before—now we see them in relation to the experiences of the past. As Bloom says at one point in the chapter, “Past was is today” (p. 514).

In dramatizing the relationship between past and present, “Circe” provides a very strange kind of exposition, literally an exposure of some of the antecedent conditions that have made the characters what they are on June 4, 1904. To alter one of Stephen’s pet phrases, we see what was there all the time within them. In “Oxen of the Sun,” Stephen is cowed by a clap of thunder, which he interprets as “Nobodaddy’s” disapproval of his apostasy; in “Circe,” May Dedalus rises from the dead to chastise him for the same thing, and we see how the son has introjected the voice of parental authority. In a sense, “Circe” provides a counterpart to the exposition of the characters’ pasts that appears in “Ithaca.” Both chapters present an inventory of the near and distant pasts of the characters and the book, but they differ in their temperament and temperature. The mode of “Circe” is hyperbolic drama; the mode of “Ithaca” is understated catechism. “Circe” is the past served “hot”; “Ithaca” is the past served “cold.”

Precisely because the material in “Circe” is so psychologically charged, the “sins of the past,” like everything else in the chapter, are presented metaphorically. As I have previously stated, we are given conceits or expressive equivalents for the characters’ psychic secrets rather than actual replays of past scenes in their lives. In keeping with the rhetoric of the dream, metaphoric substitutions, puns,
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synecdoches are used to reveal and disguise feelings. For example, Mrs Yelverton Barry's accusation of Bloom for improper advances made at 4:30 is an instance of displacement, a key process involved in dream-formation. She functions as a substitute for Molly and, as such, provides a vehicle for Bloom's fears about Molly's adultery and his guilt about his own masturbation on the beach. The "raincape watch" who call to Bloom (and whose description first appears in his memory of Bridie Kelly in "Oxen") similarly function metaphorically: they represent Bloom's self-accusations. They "watch" his actions disapprovingly, authoritatively, their "raincape" representing the forces of Bloom's own repression, the prophylaxis that protects him from his sexual desires. In an interesting discussion entitled "Watchwords in Ulysses: The Stylistics of Suppression," Margaret McBride discusses the complex pun on the word "watch" in the chapter, which, she says, symbolizes Bloom's sexual guilt over his own voyeurism (his "watching"), his cuckoldry (his watch stops at 4:30), and his masturbation (the phallic clock in "Circe," which Canon O'Hanlon "elevates and exposes" is a transformed version of the clock on the mantelpiece whose chimes conclude the hour of Bloom's masturbation). As McBride observes correctly, these painful feelings surface in "Circe," but they are represented in disguised form.3

In the dialogue as well as in the stage directions and actions of the characters, rhetorical devices such as puns appear and the process of displacement occurs. For example, in his discussion with Mrs Breen, Bloom displaces his painful feelings onto innocuous dialogue, with certain code words protruding through the fabric of trivial gossip to reveal the pain, desire, and guilt underneath. In the conversation, Bloom promises to divulge a secret to Mrs Breen if she swears to "never tell" Molly that she has seen him in Nighttown. The discussion functions as a conceit for

Bloom’s present misgivings about being in Nighttown, his deeper guilt over his voyeurism and other sexual peculiarities (it follows Gerty’s chiding of Bloom because he saw “all the secrets” of her “bottom drawer” [p. 442]), and his sexual inadequacy with Molly. The words “never tell” become code words signifying Bloom’s guilt about his relationship with Molly and his pain over her adultery; the word “Nevertell” is the name of the horse that Molly bet on the night Bloom and Mrs Breen flirted with each other and applies to the secrets he and Molly keep from each other. The conversation continues: Bloom reminds Mrs Breen of the day when Molly won the money and a Mrs Hayes falsely “advised” Mrs Breen to wear an unbecoming new hat. Mrs Breen says, “She did, of course, the cat! Don’t tell me! Nice adviser!” (p. 449). And then Bloom says, lapsing into female chitchat: “Because it didn’t suit you one quarter as well as the other ducky little tammy toque with the bird of paradise wing in it that I admired on you.” Then “(Low, secretly, ever more rapidly)” he says: “And Molly was eating a sandwich of spiced beef out of Mrs Joe Gallaher’s lunch basket. Frankly, though she had her advisers or admirers I never cared much for her style.” The dialogue includes the key words “advisers” and “admirers,” which were revealingly interchanged in Bloom’s Freudian slip earlier in the evening (see “Cyclops,” p. 313). The superficial dialogue about clothes is itself a coy digression, a rhetorical strategy that reflects an attempt to avoid sensitive material. Nevertheless, the displaced secrets leak through in the key words. The conversation continues briefly but gets too close to the telling of secrets for Bloom’s comfort. Mrs Breen fades away just at the point when the secret might be divulged. Thus, the obvious strategy of avoidance in the dialogue of the character merges with the sudden shift of scene.

The rhetorical devices in the stage directions and actions,

5 Here again, in Mrs Breen’s colloquial Irish exclamation, “Don’t tell me!” we find a form of the code word “Nevertell.”
then, cannot be distinguished functionally from those found in the characters’ dialogue, since all contribute to the dream of the text—that is, to the book’s symbolic exploration of its own significant themes. The rhetorical devices within individual speeches are only part of a larger rhetorical strategy in the chapter: even the very structure of the speeches combines rhetoric with obsession, as the text’s rhetorical strategy facilitates both exhibition and disguise. This larger sense of rhetorical structure and its relationship to psychology is illustrated, too, in the dominant motif of courtroom drama and formal debate in the chapter. For the debates and trials themselves symbolize the characters’ internal conflicts (their “courts of conscience,” as it is called at one point). These dramatic dialogues represent a kind of “splitting,” an exhibition of the character as agon to himself. In various manifestations, the “sins of the past” rise to confront the characters. The energetic trials involving Bloom thus symbolically represent both his self-accusation and self-defense. The judicial branch of rhetoric and various rhetorical forms of proof, especially, receive strenuous exercise, as the characters become orators. In defining himself, Bloom uses rhetoric with an ingenuity that could rival Seymour Bushe’s: he tries to prove his innocence by persuading his accusers of his good character, by playing on their sympathy, and by logically disproving their accusations—he employs, that is, the three main types of rhetorical proof: ethos, pathos, and logos (or logic).7

Hyperbole, gesture, and imitation are among Bloom’s favorite tools for pleading his case, and he is not above borrowing his eloquence if that will help. In answer to Mary Driscoll’s charge of sexual harassment (which represents Bloom’s own sexual guilt), he makes a “long unintelligible speech,” rendered indirectly as a stream of clichés, such as “he wanted to turn over a new leaf” and to “lead a homely

7 This “proof” anticipates some of the demands and responses in the catechism of “Ithaca.” See, for example, the imperative to “Prove that he [Bloom] loved rectitude from his earliest youth” (p. 716).
life in the evening of his days” (p. 462). He defends himself with plagiarism and claims of mistaken identity. He borrows (and bungles) Lenehan’s joke, for example, symbolizing his attempt to evade responsibility for his thoughts and actions. He admits plagiarizing from Philip Beaufoy’s story but uses the very act of plagiarism as a defense; just as the pseudonym Henry Flower is an excuse for his long-distance flirtation, his plagiarism is meant to excuse him from even greater crimes. After being burned by the mob, Bloom seeks refuge in a parody of the stage Irishman, “Let me be going now, woman of the house” (p. 499), and then tries even harder to defend himself with Shakespearean words, “To be or not to be.” “Talk away till you’re black in the face,” Zoe says; Bloom’s eloquence and plagiarism represent two of his pet defenses.

Thus, the rhetorical flamboyance and the theatrics of the chapter are a function of the struggle between exhibition and inhibition in the text. Scenes are overacted, the characters impersonate, mug, gesticulate wildly, and, in part, the melodrama functions as defense; it allows the characters to exhibit themselves and yet hide behind the excesses of their performances. One thinks yet again of Stanislaus’s comment about his brother’s confession “in a foreign language.”

But the melodrama of the chapter functions in another way as well. It is, finally, an expression of the conventional nature of the unconscious, which, after all, contains the stuff of melodrama. In the unconscious, we see ourselves in terms of the basic drama of victory and defeat; we are protagonists and antagonists, the damned and the redeemed. Beaufoy accuses Bloom of leading “a quadruple existence! Street angel and house devil” (p. 460). One of the points implied by the melodrama of “Circe” is that these roles and more are a part of the unconscious. The paradox of “Circe” is that

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we do not move beneath convention to the "real" original selves of the characters or through rhetoric to "sincerity." What we realize in the mode of "Circe" is that the unconscious is conventional and rhetorical: in the unconscious, myth and melodrama, archetype and stereotype merge. We play the roles basic to all four: parents, children, lovers, daemons. Somewhere in the dark recesses of his psyche, Stephen is a rebel and redeemer, Bloom a betrayed martyr. "Circe" helps us to see that the symbolic parallels between the characters and past literary figures are part of the role playing in the unconscious itself.

Now that the significance of the rhetoric of the drama has been explored, at least one important question remains: What is the relationship between the madcap drama of "Circe" and the plot and theme of the story? What Joyce chooses to do in "Circe" is to blend the melodrama of the unconscious with the surface melodrama of the plot. For at this point in the book the naturalistic plot is itself highly melodramatic: amid the lurking evils of the seamy underside of Dublin life, the older character rescues the younger from deceit and brutality. Here is the potential climax of the plot. Instead of writing against sentimentality, against the notion of climax as he does in "Ithaca," he milks the melodrama of both the naturalistic and the psychic plots for all they're worth. The pathopoëia of the chapter provides a chance for the book as well as the characters to act out—to try on yet another outmoded literary formula, to elaborate on it, to parody it and yet to get mileage out of it at the same time. One of the most interesting aspects of the melodrama in "Circe" is how exaggeration becomes yet another mode of possibility and skepticism. Acting out (that is, expression of the unconscious) and acting out (that is, theatricality) are one and the same: although uncensored impulses are dramatized in the chapter, it is within a context of uncertainty, disguise, and obvious theatrical illusion. Even more so than in the skits of "Cyclops" and the scenes in "Oxen of the Sun," in "Circe," we find the playing out of possible rela-

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tionships among the characters. The climaxes that are staged in the chapter are often more of a suggestion to the reader than a decisive event (physical or psychological) for the characters.

For example, at the end of the chapter, Joyce stages such a climax: the appearance of Rudy. Nothing could be more sentimental than a pantomime vision of Rudy "in mauve and lambswool." Nothing could be more stagy than suggesting that the chapter could end climactically, with Bloom rescuing Stephen and finding in him a substitute for his dead child. As in the pastiche of Charles Lamb in "Oxen of the Sun," where the romantic style seems to hold out the possibility of a happy ending, in the pathetic, even bathetic vision of Rudy, we feel a potential climax.

What the vision of Rudy does at the end of the chapter is to dramatize a lost possibility—that is, to project one of Bloom's deepest wishes at a strategic moment in the text. The vision of kidnapped Rudy is a symbolic projection of Bloom's desire and his loss. Earlier in the day he thinks to himself: "If little Rudy had lived. See him grow up. Hear his voice in the house. Walking beside Molly in an Eton suit. My son. Me in his eyes. Strange feeling it would be. From me. Just a chance" (p. 89). At the end of "Circe," Bloom almost gets his wish. We see the lost possibility dramatized: Rudy appears, eleven years, instead of eleven days old.

But unlike the visions of Bloom's mother, father, and wife, the vision of Rudy does not speak to him. Rudy is conjured up in the magic of "Circe," but the wish fulfillment is not totally successful—reality seeps in, the vision is incomplete. The sense of irretrievable and premature loss is expressed in the incompleteness of the dialogue. The vision of Rudy as Little Lord Fauntleroy and a Yeatsian stolen child (the stereotypical Celtic child kidnapped by the fairies) expresses Bloom's desire for and loss of the perfect male child in the family romance. The vision of Rudy at this particular time suggests not that Bloom recovers his son
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Rudy in Stephen but that Bloom acts like a father to Stephen.

Hugh Kenner says that in the pantomime vision of Rudy, Joyce is playing a game by creating “a parallel to the old-fashioned novel with a happy ending. In life,” he continues, “things are not transformed like that overnight, though it was a convention of fiction, once, that they might be, as it is a convention of pantomime.”9 The symbolic action of the chapter thus represents not so much a radical change in the characters as a charged exploration of their latent desires and fears and their origins expressed in a series of possible scenes. It allows us to feel where the climax would have been in a more conventional novel. Like all the other chapters, “Circe” is Joyce’s experiment with stylistic and novelistic possibilities. The melodrama, the histrionics, offer a type of resolution and climax that other books have given decisively and unequivocally—how many naive writers have resolved their plots by resorting to fantasy and dream?

Here Joyce plays with these same devices in a highly sophisticated way. The “highs” in this chapter are more allusions to climaxes than climaxes, for a number of reasons. First, the context of theatrical illusion and trompe-l’oeil (or deceit of the eye) in the chapter makes it impossible to determine the relationship between the dramas being staged and the psyches of the characters. How can “moments” like the vision of Rudy, or Bloom looking through the keyhole at Boylan and Molly, really be decisive when we are uncertain of the degree to which they represent the character’s experience? This confusion is compounded, of course, by the fact that most of the dramas in which the characters participate are composite dramas that recombine elements from the book’s past, transgressing the boundaries of the psyches of the characters. It is difficult to say what is mere theatrical magic produced for the reader’s benefit. Finally, the structure of anticlimax—that is, the undermining of the

9 See Kenner, “Circe,” p. 359.

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seeming decisiveness of events—also undercuts the idea of crisis and radical change.

That is why it is difficult to accept fully Hugh Kenner's idea that Bloom, at least, undergoes a "psychic purgation,"\textsuperscript{10} or James Maddox's thesis that Bloom confronts "his own sense of worthlessness and futility" (an "inheritance from his father"). "Circe" dramatizes, Maddox says, Bloom's ability to absorb his sense of impotence and despair, "to accept his own feelings of futility and yet still commit himself to the world of broken lampshades. Insofar as Bloom is able at least to accept the unhappy circumstances of his father's death, he is able to move tentatively toward the vision of himself as a father."\textsuperscript{11} Well, yes and no. Bloom does act like a father in "Circe," from his entrance into Nighttown to search for Stephen, "the best of the lot," to his defense of him and his literal "rescue" at the end of the chapter. But it is impossible to pinpoint the relationship between the expressionistic dialogues and these naturalistic events. The direct relevance of Bloom's confrontation with his father to his relationship with Stephen is also less obvious than Maddox suggests. (Besides, the most "dramatic" of all the episodes is Bloom's confrontation with Bella/Bello rather than with Virag, and the most psychologically revealing is, as Maddox acknowledges, Bloom's vision of Boylan and Molly.) More importantly, Maddox overlooks the fact that Bloom's confrontation with his own worthlessness is a process that occurs continually, all day long. The symbolic and dramatic projection of previously repressed content reveals something about the psyches of the characters: it demonstrates that crisis is coextensive with their lives. They are constantly fighting the battles they fight in "Circe"—constantly, in Bloom's case, acknowledging and then repressing their feelings. "No one is anything. This is the very worst hour of the day," Bloom thinks in "Lestrygonians" (p. 164),

\textsuperscript{10} See Kenner, "Circe," p. 356.

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and then gets on with his physical and mental wanderings. “Circe” presents a stunning image of Bloom’s ability to survive, but it is an ability that we have seen all day.

The mounting excitement of “Circe” cannot be denied, but the whole of Ulysses makes us suspicious of the decisiveness of one event, physical or psychological. The aggressively overt symbolism in the chapter sometimes amounts to a kind of mock peripety. For example, as many critics have observed, Bloom’s button snaps and he faces up to Zoe, evidently realizing “who wears the pants.” The popping of the button is a real occurrence (Bloom is missing his button later on), and it symbolically expresses Bloom’s sudden assertiveness: momentarily, he reasserts his masculinity. But the symbol itself is comic and burlesque—one would expect the popping of a button, even a back trouser button, to suggest the possibility that the pants might fall down—and some of this enters into the symbol to color its potential as a serious symbol of the reemergence of masculine dominance. The symbol here is a leaky vessel—for all its overt meaningfulness, it reminds us of its opposite. Furthermore, soon after this seemingly climactic reversal, the height of Bloom’s masochistic fantasies are dramatized as he welcomes Boylan to Molly’s bed. And if Bloom’s troubles are acknowledged and conquered in the chapter, why does he continue to suppress the thought of Molly in the Cabman’s shelter? (“Suppose she was gone when he...” [p. 653]). The structure of anticlimax and the pain-taking detail in Ulysses have shown us that if people do change, it is inch by inch rather than all at once, and in the dark rather than in a flash of blinding light.

The indeterminacy of events in “Circe” is further revealed in an interesting allusion in “Ithaca” to one of the Circean dialogues:

Why did Bloom refrain from stating that he had frequented the university of life?

Because of his fluctuating incertitude as to whether this
observation had or had not been already made by him to Stephen or by Stephen to him. (P. 682)

The "fluctuating incertitude" is a telling phrase, appropriate to our own uncertainty about how to treat the "events" of "Circe." Bloom has "spoken" this phrase, not to Stephen but to Philip Beaufoy, in defense of his own practical education. The question and answer in "Ithaca" imply that Bloom has a hazy recollection of the thought, as if some of the dialogue in "Circe" represented thought that hovers between the subconscious and the conscious. The significance of the dialogues and tableaux in "Circe" cannot be pinned down more explicitly than this. Hugh Kenner speaks of the "accidental psychoanalysis" that occurs in the chapter in an attempt to explain how a character can change without ever becoming conscious of his painful thoughts as he would in psychoanalysis. The stress of the physical surroundings does produce a kind of psychological climax in the characters, but, finally, the climax is literary—the latent problems of the characters are given form in the symbolic landscape of the chapter, just as their actions and conscious feelings are expressed in musical phrases in "Sirens."

The stylistic strategy of histrionics and catharsis in "Circe" fails as a "key" to the book. The talky, desultory style of "Eumaeus" is an intentional letdown for the reader after the explosives in Nighttown. Finally, if the peripety were placed firmly, unequivocally, in "Circe," there would be no need for the "Ithaca" chapter, which recapitulates and sorts out the events of the day yet once more.