

How do witches work

In this contemporary work of fiction, American writer Madeline Miller revisits the story of Circé, a goddess from the Greek mythology and one of the first witches mentioned in history.

At first, of course, all I brewed¹ were mistakes. Draughts² that did nothing, pastes that crumbled and lay dead on the table. I thought that if some rue³ was good, more was better, that ten herbs mixed were superior to five, that I could let my mind wander⁴ and the spell would not wander with it, that I could begin making one draught and halfway through decide to make another. I did not
5 know even the simplest herb-lore⁵ that any mortal would learn at her mother's knee: that wort⁶ plants boiled made a sort of soap, that yew⁷ burnt in the hearth sent up a choking smog, that poppies had sleep in their veins and hellebore⁸ death, and yarrow⁹ could close over wounds. All these things had to be worked and learned through errors and trials, burnt fingers and fetid clouds that sent me running outside the cough in the garden.

10 At least, I thought in those early days, once I cast a spell, I would not have to learn it again. But even that was not true. [...] Each spell was a mountain to be climbed anew. All I could carry with me from last time was the knowledge that it could be done.

Circé, Madeline Miller (2018)

¹ infuser

² potions

³ Plante médicinale (rue, en français)

⁴ vagabonder

⁵ connaissances traditionnelles en herboristerie

⁶ millepertuis (plante)

⁷ if (arbre)

⁸ hellébore (plante)

⁹ millefeuille (plante)