

To Be Made Cowardly and Unmanly: Depictions of Female Spellcasters in Classical Literature

The use of magic in the classical world was widespread; it was exceedingly common for individuals to seek out professionals in order to be given spells or rituals that could help achieve their desires. A large percentage of remaining spells were written by and intended for men (Stratton, 2007). We have evidence for different types of magic, but many of these spells were erotic in nature and focused on the complete removal of what little autonomy the object of their desire possessed. Even though men were frequent users of magic, male authors and playwrights usually cast women as the practitioners of magic; this disparity is likely the result of both misogyny and the classical ideas surrounding masculinity. Magic, although used by men in their everyday lives, was delegated feminine and ignoble. This was due to the implication that its caster held no societal power, and instead was forced to rely on mystical powers to achieve their goals. Literary depictions of female spellcasters are almost always negative; these women are portrayed as monstrous and power-seeking, and they subvert the gender norms of the typical classical society. The depictions of these witches, while not a direct view into the daily life of an average spellcaster, are helpful in understanding the way that not only people interacted with and conceptualized magic, but also what they thought of empowered, active women. The way that witches were conceptualized across genres and periods in classical literature demonstrates the intense fear of a sexually active woman who could threaten the autonomy of free men. This paper examines numerous depictions of spellcasters across Greek and Roman literature and their connections to misogyny, classical ideas around masculinity, and sexual autonomy.

Works Cited:

Kimberly B. Stratton, "Magic, Discourse, and Ideology," In *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*, 1–38, Columbia University Press, 2007,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/stra13836.6>.