Of Lions, Witches, and Wardrobes: What descriptors say about the character of a witch

In this paper I will examine Greek epic and tragedy to discern how animal connections and vocabulary concerning titles, actions, and physical dress determine the true nature of a woman who is considered a witch. Witches are scattered throughout ancient sources with varying descriptions of their appearances, abilities, motives, and characters. As Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (1999, pp. 97-113) note, these figures may share any combination of conventional commonalities associated with witches, but in general they are personalized to fit within their specific narrative. While focusing on Medea and Circe, I will also look at other unique women within myth such as Penelope and Atalanta, whose strength lies in mental and physical capacities respectively, to ascertain whether magical knowledge is the only thing that separates witches from other powerful women.

The use of *pharmaka* is often associated with witchcraft, but - as Stratton discusses - the herbs themselves are rather neutral, the motives, however, can range from wickedness to benevolence depending on the context (2007, pp. 26-30). Additionally, witches are not the only individuals who employ *pharmaka* - Odysseus searches for *pharmaka* to dip his arrows in (Hom.*Od*.1.260-262), while *pharmaka* in the *Iliad* is often used in more charitable contexts: Patroklos, taught healing arts by Cheiron, and the healer Machaon use them medicinally on wounded soldiers (Hom. *Il*.11.394; 4.218). As such, it is not simply the use of *pharmaka*, even for negative purposes, that sets witches apart. Thus, it is necessary to further explore the characterizations of these women past their skill with *pharmaka*.

One aspect that I will explore in detail is how Euripides' *Medea* is not only filled with vocabulary about wisdom and planning, but also includes themes of battle through verbs,

epithets typically used of Ares, and animal comparisons similar to those associated with male heroes amidst fighting in epic, which all place her further from the realm expected of women. Medea's temper and intelligence remain the focus, rather than her physical characteristics. Medea herself observes how the appearance of being wise can be threatening and her knowledge of harmful witchcraft makes her even more dangerous (Eur. *Med*. 300-305). When Medea's physical attributes are commented on, they transport her further from the idealized domestic women - at one point the verb ἀποταυροῦνται is used to describe her gaze (Eur. *Med*. 188). The word literally means "to be bull-like" and when paired with 'looks' it then has the connotations of "casting savage glances." By having one of the few places where Medea's physicality is described in a manner both animal-like and savage, Euripides is able emphasize her fearsomeness and separation from other women. Additionally, the only time clothing is talked about at length it is not something that Medea wears, but rather the robe and crown that she douses in *pharmaka* and magic that will cause Glauke's gruesome death.

Circe is another figure whose character is more complex than it may first appear. Daniel Odgden points out that the description of Circe as a goddess does not indicate that she cannot be a witch, but rather that the terms witch and goddess fall under different categories and need not conflict with one another (2008, pp. 21-26). Circe fitting into both classifications lends to the liminality that embodies her entire character. When Odysseus' men come upon Circe's house, they first encounter lions and wolves that she has tamed with *pharmaka* to such an extent that the animals welcome the men as domesticated dogs welcome their owners (Hom.*Od*.10.212-219). With this alone Circe is already balancing the threshold between wildness and domesticity. Moreover, the question of her marital status has been touched upon by other scholars. Tim Stover indicates that there seems to be a tradition of Circe being married or at least having

suitors that had survived even into later Latin works (2001, pp. 177-178, 184-186). Odysseus says that Circe wanted to trap him as a husband, marking that she is unmarried. However, there are a few descriptions that make her marital status more blurred as her hair is said to be woven or bound in some way and she veils her head, both of which are customs of married women, not of young maidens (Hom.*Od*.10.310, 10.545). Thus, I will examine how their characteristics, rather than only their use of magic, separates witches from societal norms.

Bibliography

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