

Roman Witches and Orpheus

The Augustan poets were fascinated with witches, who proliferate in poetry from Vergil onwards. Augustan witches have little basis in actual magical practitioners; they are composite figures, drawing on sources such as Greek poetic witches, mythological monsters, and stereotypes of Roman prostitutes and lower-class medico-magical practitioners (Dickie 2001, Gordon 1999, Spaeth 2014). As a result, a wide range of powers with origins in these different tropes was attributed to them. The catalogue of the witch's powers became a standard *topos* of Augustan poetry: the Augustan *saga* can call down the moon; stop the stars from rising and setting; perform binding spells, curses, and love magic; call up the dead; shape-shift; blight crops; and do other noxious or uncanny things. Many of these spells have no obvious relevance to the erotic magic which is the foremost concern of Augustan witches; why should Ovid's Dipsas, for example, be said to clear the sky or bring on rainclouds at will (*Amores* 1.8.5-14)? Other witches, such as Lucan's Thessalians (*Pharsalia* 6.465-472), also command nature, altering the weather, reversing the flow of rivers, making rocks and trees move, and moving the moon and stars. Necromancy was also added to the catalogue of the Roman witch's abilities at this time. Aside from the traditional Greek claim that witches can draw down the moon, most of these powers do not have an obvious precedent among the (predominantly female) literary tropes previously recognized as contributing to the evolving stereotype of the Roman witch.

Instead, I argue that the best precedent for Augustan witches' control over the natural world is Orpheus, whose ability to tame nature with his songs was well-known to the Augustans. Orpheus was credited with the ability to control the stars, calm storms, make rocks and trees move, and tame animals through his playing and singing. He was also associated with ghost-

raising and contact with the underworld. Orpheus offered a convenient model to Augustan poets, who made their witches frightening and gruesome, capable of overmastering the gods themselves. By adding Orpheus' supernatural control of nature to the evolving figure of the witch, Augustan poets invested their sorceresses with a frightening grandeur which previous Roman witches had lacked. Moreover, Orpheus was known primarily for his music. In Roman thought, the two main types of magic, *venena*, magical substances, and *carmina*, songs/spells, are usually found as a pair. The poets may have felt that their witches lacked a pedigree for using *carmina*; the other, female, stereotypes who contributed to the witch figure were primarily users of philters, herbs, poisons, and other plant and animal-based compounds which fall under the rubric of *venena*. Orpheus provides an archetypal model for the *carmina*-based practitioner, filling out the Roman magical dyad. Orpheus was also Thracian, making him perhaps an easy male analogue for witches, who are usually from marginal peoples, especially Thessalians.

By acquiring Orphic powers, witches, became more nearly a female version of the male magician. In contemporary Roman discourse a man who practiced magic was likely to be an educated philosopher-mage, often with Orphic or Pythagorean leanings, like Publius Vatinus or Nigidius Figulus. The Augustans tend to make their witches alarming by taking traditional philosophical explanations of why magic should not work and twisting them into expressions of horror by the assumption that it does. In witches, the claim to control the gods, which critics since Plato impute to magicians and mock as impossible, becomes literal: witches in Roman poetry actually *do* command the gods (e.g. Lucan *Pharsalia* 6.642-9), making Roman witches hostile inversions of the philosopher-mage. As such, they get the dark side of Orpheus and Orphism—worrisome powers over nature, secret rites and accusations of necromancy.

Bibliography

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