

Ladies of the Night: Defining Supernatural Legitimacy in the Roman Empire

Interaction with the supernatural shaped the daily lives of people living in the Roman Empire. Observing traditional rituals and festivals maintained the harmony between the State and the gods. Public rituals and cults were not the only means people in antiquity had at their disposal to interact with the supernatural. Oracles and wandering seers also could give a person living in antiquity access to the divine. But Roman literary sources point to a third group of individuals who actively tapped into the supernatural by using magic and performed their arts at night. These individuals were known as witches. Roman writers such as Horace, Lucan, and Apuleius portray witches in their writings as hideous, female beings capable of performing all kinds of incantations to suit their individual desires at the expense of others. While it is possible that there may have been some women in antiquity who claimed to practice magic like the women in these stories and who may have slightly resembled these 'ladies of the night,' it is highly unlikely that there were any witches as dangerous to the collective good as the ancient sources make them out to be. What is more likely is that Roman writers used the image of the witch as propaganda to reinforce their own notions about 'proper' Roman ways of seeking out the divine. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that ancient writers, in particular Apuleius, construct their literary witches as objects of fear and ridicule in order to promote an ideology of acceptable ways of approaching the supernatural. From an analysis of the ancient sources, one is able to construct a model of supernatural legitimacy that has in its center the traditional, state-run cults and festivals as the safest and most 'Roman' way to approach the divine while going to a witch would occupy the most dangerous and least 'Roman' way to invoke the supernatural.