

It may come as a surprise to find out that witches were quite as well-known and feared in classical times as we are told they were in the Middle Ages and even later. In Rome itself, and in the towns and villages of Italy, witches were practising their rites throughout the hundreds of years of Roman imperial power. Unfortunately, most of our information about the Roman witches comes from poets and other writers whose portraits of them are already stylised and literary, rather than drawn from life. Ovid, for example, views Medea as the traditional sorceress, who works by the light of the full moon, turning and wailing and crying three times to Hecate, whom she salutes as the triple goddess, the assistant of the arts of magic and incantation. Medea boasts of her skill as a poisoner, and prays for a potion to turn age to youth once more. After a wild nine days and nights of riding abroad to gather herbs with her bronze sickle, Medea performs elaborate rites to Hecate, sacrificing a black ram, and making libations of wine, milk and blood. In her cauldron of bronze are all the traditional ingredients of a witches' brew: herbs and flower-juices, hoar-frost, an owl's flesh, the entrails of a were-wolf, snake-meat, a stag's liver and the eggs and head of a crow. As she stirs the brew with a dead olive branch, it suddenly turns green and sprouts leaves once more, as the powerful magic potion restores it to youth. (Ovid: Metamorphoses Bk. 7)

Horace describes a similarly grotesque scene in the eighth poem of his first book of Satires. He mocks the two old witches, Canidia ('Grey-hair') and Sagana ('Witchy') performing their rites in the moonlight among the tombs of the Esquiline graveyard. The pair sacrifice a black lamb by tearing it apart with their teeth, make vengeful use of woollen and wax dolls, bury a wolf's beard and a spotted snake's tooth, and call up the spirits of the dead. Horace refers to Canidia in several other poems as a skilled poisoner, and the ancient commentators on Horace's poems claim that her real name was not Canidia, but Gratidia, and that she came from Naples and was a manufacturer of perfumes. Her monstrous talents as a witch are vividly brought before us in Epode 5, where she and three other old hags lure a child into their house intending to starve him to death, and to make use of his liver and marrow in a magic love-potion. With snakes entwined in her unkempt hair, Canidia calls for branches from the wild fig tree and the cypress (both associated with cemeteries and funerals), the eggs and feathers of a screech owl, well smeared with a poisonous frog's blood, herbs from the far Caucasus, and bones snatched from the jaws of a starving bitch. She gnaws her thumb as she worries over the success of her spells, praying to Night and to Diana (of whom Hecate, the traditional witch-goddess, is merely another aspect) in her anxiety over her failure to fetch her old lover back to her. The pleas of the child victim seem to have little effect on the witches' stony hearts.

Vergil writes a poem about a love-spell too—Eclogue 8. Along with the usual ingredients of herbs and incense, and the doll-effigy of clay or wax, there must be a good deal of elaborate three-fold ritual, and in the end the love-tokens the girl's lover gave her are thrown away, as are the ashes of the effigy. But it is a successful spell, and the dog barks as he hears the lover returning home to his girl, who promptly orders her spells to cease working on him.

Apuleius in The Golden Ass provides his readers with some fascinating material about the witches of Thessaly and their powers, and in Pliny and Petronius we

Witches in Roman Times -- continued

can find tales of were-wolves, ghosts and haunted houses. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Romans were a highly superstitious people. Here is an inscription from a funerary monument, which retells exactly Horace's grim tale, from the child's point of view:

In quartum surgens comprehensus deprimor annum
Cum possem matri dulcis et esse patri.
Eripuit me saga manus crudelis ubique
Cum manet in terris et nocit arte sua.
Vos vestros natos concustodite parentes
Ni dolor in toto pectore fixsus eat.

C.I.L. VI, 19747.

(You may notice that the grammar and spelling are a bit shaky--something not unusual in inscriptions of this sort--but you should be able to puzzle it out with a little help from a dictionary.)

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Special Announcement

The last issue of Labyrinth announced a "Classical Limerick Contest" with prizes of \$10 and \$5 to the two best limericks submitted. The deadline for entries was December 1st, and, as we all know, the mail strike was in progress at that time. As a result, we have decided to prolong the contest until March 1, 1976, and we again invite all secondary school students to participate.

With apologies, we offer yet another example of a "Classical Limerick":

There once was a hero named Heracles
Whose aim was always to please,
He performed one dozen labours
To help all his neighbors,
Then flew up to heaven at ease.

Please send your entries to Labyrinth, ^c/o Dr. P. Forsyth, Classics,
University of Waterloo. Each limerick should have your name and school
on it.

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