

The Typicality of Apuleius' Witches

Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* centres upon magic and protagonist Lucius' *curiositas* ('curiosity') as he becomes deeply immersed in the world of witchcraft. The witches he encounters are largely unlike Greek sorceresses, and while this is typical of Latin literary witches,¹ they also display many traits characteristic of generic, folkloric and archetypal night-witches. This essay shall analyse Apuleius' witches from a literary, cultural, and anthropological perspective, and assess how typical they are of witches in the Greco-Roman tradition, and of modern ones. It will particularly focus on witchcraft practices not found in other classical texts but present in modern societies, thereby demonstrating the great antiquity which such beliefs possess. Where possible, it will also try to explain specific aspects of witchery in the text through reference to witchcraft tradition, contemporary Roman culture, and theories derived from social anthropology.

Meroe

The first word of Apuleius' picaresque novel is '*Thessaliam*' (I. 5), thus beginning in an epic fashion,² and immediately introducing the theme of witchcraft because of Thessaly's association with the art in classical literature. Indeed, the terms *Thessalae* and *Thessalides* are regularly used to mean 'witches',³ and a cult to Hecate, the goddess of sorcery, existed there.⁴ Meroe, the first enchantress encountered in the romance, is "no longer young but extraordinarily attractive" (*anus sed admodum scitula*) (I. 8). This description entwines Greek and Latin traditions: Greek sorceresses are typically beautiful and young,⁵ whereas Latin literary witches are often *anus* ('old')⁶ and ugly.⁷ Although both young and old women are particularly connected to witchcraft because of the supposed magical properties of menstrual blood and the notion that the power of witchcraft 'is counteracted by child-bearing',⁸ old witches are more common in modern societies.⁹ Thus Meroe, as aged but attractive, is a Roman *saga* who embodies both Greek traits, and ones indicative of more archetypal witches.

Socrates' recount of the punishments Meroe has inflicted on various members of the community for minor things (I. 9) implies that she acts, not for material gain, but out of envy, malice and spite – as witches typically do.¹⁰ Interestingly, however, she does change her "neighbour and rival" (*vicinus atque ob id aemulus*) (I. 9), into a frog. Although it is plausible that this transformation was borne out of pure jealousy, it is necessary to note that running a *caupona* ('inn') was one of the few ways an

¹ Stratton, 2007, p. 72.

² The opening resembles the *mēnin* and *andra* of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* respectively, though Tatum explains that such an opening is uncommon for a romance. Interestingly, Scobie notes that 'there are many single hexameter lines imbedded in the prose of The Golden Ass.' See: Tatum, J., 'Apuleius and Metamorphosis', *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (1972), p. 306; and: Scobie, A., *Aspects of the Ancient romance and its Heritage*, (Meisenheim am Glan, 1969), p. 32.

³ Burriss, 1936, p. 139.

⁴ Baroja, 1964, p. 77.

⁵ Medea, for example, is a young maiden but skilled in sorcery (Apollonius, *Argonautica*, III. 528-34).

⁶ Burriss, 1936, p. 140.

⁷ Notably Dipsas has white hair and wrinkles (Ovid, *Amores*, I. VIII. 111-2), and Erichtho is pale and emaciated (Lucan, *Pharsalia*, VI. 515-8).

⁸ Briffault, 1959, p. 284.

⁹ *Ibid.* Interestingly, although the western world's stereotypical image of a witch finds an old, ugly hag, technical witchcraft terms like 'enchanting' and 'bewitching' still have sexual connotations, meaning the Greek tradition has partly permeated into our culture.

¹⁰ Mayer, 1954, p. 56.

independent, elderly woman could sustain a living in pagan Roman society, and that the occupation of *lena* ('procuress') was commonly found in conjunction with witchcraft.¹¹ This thus means her punitive metamorphosis of her rival innkeeper may have also had a monetary motive. Meroe's drunkenness (I. 9) is also typically elegiac,¹² and inevitably arises from her running a *caupona*. As for her abilities, Socrates credits Meroe with control over pregnancy (I. 9), a power attributed to witches across a number of modern societies, such as the Mandari of East Africa;¹³ and can manipulate natural processes (I. 9), as is common for Thessalian witches. Similarly, she can perform the 'Thessalian Trick' (I. 6), the phenomenon in which the moon is brought down to earth so that its magical ingredients can be extracted and used in love potions.¹⁴ Such perceived power over the natural world is possibly because Hecate, the patroness of witches, was also a moon-goddess; but it may also be because women's bodily constitutions were considered to be intimately connected to the natural world, especially to the moon which, in many witchcraft-present societies, is believed to be both the source of their reproductive and magical powers.¹⁵

Meroe's attack on Socrates with her sister Panthia is unique in the context of Greco-Roman witchcraft but in fact bears resemblance to a number of modern witchcraft practices. In similar fashion to how magicians of the *Veles* of Guadalcanal and *Vada* of south-eastern New Guinea purportedly first daze their victim, Meroe and Panthia don't wake Socrates despite their loud entrance (I. 10); Meroe then pulls out his heart (I. 11), much as *Veles* and *vada* magicians extract their victim's vital organs; they likewise miraculously close the wound, which the Apuleian witches do too, though by using a sponge (I. 11); finally, both victims live a little longer, but cannot name their assailants and die shortly afterwards.¹⁶ The sisters' revenge also resembles a vampire attack,¹⁷ since they collect the poor man's blood and cross the threshold of the room – which is significant in threshold mythology.¹⁸ Expanding upon this, Leinweber asserts that the pair embodies vampiric qualities, particularly those associated with the classical *Lamiae*,¹⁹ and that Apuleius' use of the term (I. 13) to describe the sorceresses is 'indicative of the hybrid blending of two old folklore traditions, that of *Lamiae* and more generic old witches.'²⁰ In contrast, Burriss' statement that the significance of the term is lost in Apuleius, for Meroe and Panthia 'are merely witches and not suckers of blood',²¹ as the *Lamiae* originally were, is unconvincing. Their night-attack also exemplifies the anthropological concept of how witches and sorceresses delight in 'unnatural practices' and cruelty.²² Panthia asks whether they are first going to tear Socrates apart or castrate him (I. 11); and as part of her revenge Meroe effectively assigns

¹¹ Scobie, 1983, pp. 93-4.

¹² Ovid's Dipsas reportedly never sees the dawn sober (*Amores*, I. VIII. 3-4), and Propertius wishes a procuress-witch to have 'an ancient wine-jar with chipped neck' as her tombstone (IV. V. 75), which Dickie (2001, p. 184) elucidates was a literary motif for alcoholics.

¹³ Buxton, 1963, p. 103.

¹⁴ I firmly believe Hill here that it refers to this, and not a lunar eclipse. For further detail, see: Hill, D. E., 'The Thessalian Trick', *RhM*, Vol. 166 (1973), pp. 221-37.

¹⁵ Briffault, 1959, pp. 294-5.

¹⁶ Firth, 1956, p. 40.

¹⁷ Leinweber, 1994, p. 79.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²¹ Burriss, 1936, p. 139.

²² Mayer, 1954, p. 56.

Aristomenes as accomplice, which forces him to bury his friend and exile himself.²³ The two witches also urinate on the narrator before leaving (I. 11); such urinary behaviour – which serves no magical function and is purely an epitome of them delighting in unpleasant activities – is not found in other Greco-Roman literature, but is among Mandari witches.²⁴

Pamphile

No explicit mention is made of Pamphile's age, though Scobie declares that "*maga primi nominis*" (II. 21) – which Graves translates as 'she is a well-known witch' – implies she is old. He then expounds his slightly tenuous statement, suggesting that she is supposed to be envisaged as 'no longer young but extraordinarily attractive' ('*anus, sed admodum scitula*') like Meroe. His reason for this is that it would be 'at odds with her role as seductive enchantress' were she ugly;²⁵ however, his assumption that she is a 'seductive enchantress' is based solely on Byrrhena's warning that she "binds [men] to her with the unbreakable fetters of boundless eroticism" ('*amoris profundi pedicis aeternis alligat*') (II. 21). This does not necessarily denote attractiveness and Photis' narrative of Pamphile and the handsome young Boeotian proves that she does use charms for seduction (III. 44-5). Consequently no definite assertion about her looks can be made.

Pamphile's sorcery, however, is typical of Latin witchcraft: she possesses power over ghosts (II. 44), a common ability of Thessalian witches;²⁶ like Meroe has control over natural processes (II. 21); and Byrrhena's description of Pamphile's magic as "*carmen sepulcrale*" (II. 21) connotes singing,²⁷ much as the sorceress in Virgil's *Eclogue VIII* sings her love charm. Both spells also involve sprinkling ingredients over a fire, a practice similarly found in an attraction spell from the 3rd or 4th century AD. Ogden explains that the use of fire in this spell is 'to instil the heat of desire',²⁸ which indicates the role of Sympathetic Magic in the charm.²⁹ The fire in Pamphile's charm is presumably for the same purpose, and the key ingredient, hair of the beloved (II. 44), reveals her spell to be a form of Contagious Magic, the use of hair in which is extremely common, for 'whoever gets possession of human hair or nails may work his will, at any distance, upon the person from whom they were cut.'³⁰ The descriptions of her sorcery as *facinerosae illecebrae* and *mala ars* (II. 21) connote evil purposes,³¹ and pertinently she '[lives] outside the city walls', ('*extra pomerium et urbem totam colit*') (I. 15) – as is common for those practising harmful witchcraft.

²³ For a discussion of this, see: Frangoulidis, S. A., Cui Videbor Veri Similia Dicere Proferens Vera?: Aristomenes and the Witches in Apuleius' Tale of Aristomenes, *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (1999), pp. 375-91.

²⁴ Buxton, 1963, pp. 103-4.

²⁵ Scobie, 1983, p. 92.

²⁶ Meroe can raise the dead too (I. 8), as can Erichtho (Lucan, *Pharsalia*, VI. 633-6).

²⁷ Burriss, 1936, p. 142.

²⁸ Ogden, 2009, p. 233.

²⁹ Sympathetic Magic is the notion that things which are either similar (Homeopathic Magic) or were once in contact (Contagious Magic) affect each other through a secret sympathy. For a full definition, see: Frazer, J. G., *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, (Oxford, 1998), pp. 27-8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³¹ Burriss, p. 138.

Pamphile's metamorphosis, however, is the greatest point of interest with regard to her practices. Although the eponymous theme of metamorphosis itself flourishes in Apuleius' romance,³² since the novel follows in the Ovidian tradition of metamorphosis,³³ Pamphile's transformation is given by far the most attention. Her ritual parallels the one performed by the sorceress in Lucian, *Lucius or The Ass* (XII), to which the ass-tale is related, as she metamorphoses into an owl – an animal connected to witchcraft in both Roman³⁴ and African traditions.³⁵ The association between witches and owls may be because witchcraft is particularly active at night;³⁶ however, it may also be connected to how there are often 'no distinct boundaries between animal and man' in pre-industrial cultures.³⁷ In her metamorphosis ritual, Pamphile begins by stripping (III. 47), a common phenomenon of shape-shifting tales;³⁸ her subsequent application of unguents and resultant shaking (III. 47) 'accurately reflects the application of narcotic stimulants to the human body', a technique shared by many shamanistic cultures worldwide.³⁹ Thus the ritual is very typical of ones in the Greco-Roman tradition of transformation, and of modern ones.

The Witches in Thelyphron's Tale

The *sagae* in Thelyphron's narrative who come to steal the body of a man who has died, as Thessalian witches habitually do (II. 29), act very strangely, which is one reason why Perry considers it to be an 'awkward compound' of different stories.⁴⁰ Seemingly unable to burst through the locked door (unlike Meroe and Panthia), the witch inserts herself through a small crevice, much as Lobedu witches allegedly can,⁴¹ having first transformed into a weasel to do so (II. 31). However, she proceeds to vacate the room and then, having first enveloped Thelyphron in sleep, cuts off his nose and ears through a small hole in the wall (II. 33). For Perry, this anachronistic behaviour (of leaving the room and instead trying to mutilate Thelyphron through a small crevice) is Apuleius' attempt at telling 'two stories about the ravages of witches as if it were all one.'⁴² Whilst he may be correct that the story is a fusion of different sources, his proceeding analysis – criticising how Thelyphron's wax, facial replacements remain intact for the remainder of the ordeal, and how he has to replace these features instead of simply keeping them on – subjects the folk tale to an absurd level of logical scrutiny, one which folk tales shouldn't be subjected to, and so weakens his argument.⁴³ Ogden's suggestion that Apuleius banishes the sorceress from the room to explain their mistake of confusing the corpse with the living man is, ultimately, far less extreme and more credible.⁴⁴ Gordon's observation that the

³² For an excellent discussion of how Apuleius weaves metamorphosis into his work, see: Tatum, 1972, pp. 306-313.

³³ Tatum elucidates that metamorphosis was only ever found in a literal sense in Greek texts, and that Ovid is the first to change this tradition (*Ibid.*, p. 310). The '*vocis immutatio*' (I. 5) in Apuleius' prologue – which refers to him writing in a different language, and is the first transformation in the novel – almost certainly alludes to '*mutastisi*' (I. 2) in Ovid's prologue, which denotes a change of genre and is likewise the first metamorphosis in his work.

³⁴ See: Ovid, *Amores*, VIII. 13-4.

³⁵ Evans-Pritchard, 1929, p. 30

³⁶ *Ibid.* This is the reason among the Azande.

³⁷ Scobie, 1983, ps. 98.

³⁸ Leinweber, 1994, p. 81.

³⁹ Scobie, 1983, p. 104.

⁴⁰ Perry, 1929, p. 231.

⁴¹ Krige, 1947, p. 264.

⁴² Perry, 1929, p. 235.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 236-9.

⁴⁴ Ogden, 2009, p. 139.

robbing of graves often 'evokes a world in which the symbolic means of putting things in their place, of setting things right, has gone awry'⁴⁵ is significant here, since Lucius has already heard terrible stories about local witchcraft, and is about to be accidentally metamorphosed into an ass. In making direct reference to Thelyphron's story, Gordon explains another purpose that contemporary witchcraft served:

'the moralisation and rationalisation of the divine world that slowly took place from the Archaic period had, by the Hellenistic period, made it difficult to accommodate misfortune into the dominant image of the civic pantheon... the image of the night-witch, particularly the necromantic witch... can be understood as a further adjustment to a moralised heaven.'⁴⁶

The validity of his theory is enhanced by the observations of many social anthropologists: Kluckhohn notes that, among the Navaho, witchcraft serves as 'an adaptive structure of a high order';⁴⁷ and likewise Mayer elucidates that it is imperative in protecting 'the picture of the moral universe.'⁴⁸ Perhaps connected to this notion that post-Hellenic witches serve as adjustments to a moralised, rationalised pantheon is how Meroe and Pamphile are credited with powers over the gods, thus making them godlike puppeteers of others' fortunes: Meroe is able to "hurl the gods from their thrones; to quench the stars or illuminate the dark Land of Shadows" ('*deos infimare, sidera extinguere, Tartarum ipsum influminare*') (I. 9); and Pamphile can similarly lighten Tartarus (II. 21) and constrain deities (III. 45).

Book XI's *veteratrix*

The *veteratrix* hired to reanimate the baker's love for his adulterous wife presumably attempts to do so using love potions,⁴⁹ thereby fulfilling a role Roman witches played in serving disillusioned lovers. Indeed, Apuleius infers it is a common one since the wife has 'turned back to her old tricks, indulging in the sort of practice that women like to engage in' ('*ad armillum revertit et ad familiares feminarum artes accenditur*') (IX. 153). These 'love philtres were sold in Rome by the old women who dealt in abortifacients', and the *poculum amatorium* ('love potion') actually became so used in early imperial Rome that a decree was eventually promulgated, declaring that love-potions were deemed poison – which they effectively were considering the substances they were composed of.⁵⁰ Yet when she fails to reanimate the baker's love for his wife, she sets on him the shade 'of a woman who had died by violence' ('*violenter peremptae mulieris*') (IX. 153). Similar necromancy is performed by Lobedu witches, for they may punish someone by summoning their most feared familiar, the *khidudwane*: a human 'killed in such a way that when he is buried only his shadow is interred, the real personality being imprisoned in a large earthen pot by day and dispatched by its mistress upon sinister missions

⁴⁵ Gordon, 1999, p. 208.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-9.

⁴⁷ Kluckhohn, 1962, p. 255.

⁴⁸ Mayer, 1954, p. 60.

⁴⁹ Although there is no actual mention of a love-potion, it can be assumed that Apuleius is referring to them when he describes her as '*quae devotionibus ac maleficiis quiduis efficere posse credebatur*' (IX. 153); indeed Graves even translates this as: 'who had the reputation of being able to do whatever she liked with the help of charms and drugs'.

⁵⁰ Thompson, 1927, p. 84. The ingredients largely consisted of various disgusting entrails and parts of animals.

by night.⁵¹ There is no mention of when the witch's *biaiothanatos* ('one dead by violence') is summoned, but it arrives at noon (IX. 153), which is still a 'witching hour' in some European countries, possibly since no shadows are cast at that time, thus making it uncanny, and also because it belongs neither especially to the morning nor afternoon.⁵²

Thus all the witches in Apuleius' novel are alike to many Latin literary witches in both their portraits and practices, which are themselves often products of Roman culture and belief. They also resemble modern witches in many respects; particularly their night-attacks, which themselves often have almost exact modern parallels, and their reversal of socially-accepted standards. This ultimately demonstrates how witchcraft possesses a temporal universality. Furthermore, their practices, even those unique to Greco-Roman witchcraft centre upon canonical, anthropological principles. Although the witches certainly are quite unlike their Greek counterparts, their literary heritage is evident, especially in Meroe's appearance and Pamphile's metamorphosis ritual. Ultimately though, Apuleius' witches are predominantly a blend of folkloric, Roman, and generic night-witches, which explains why certain aspects of their witchery are not found in other classical texts.

⁵¹ Krige, 1947, p. 265.

⁵² Scobie, 1983, p. 137.

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