

From Greek myth to medieval witches: infertile women as monstrous and evil

Linda McGuire

Abstract

In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII issued a papal bull declaring “witches” as heretics. Shortly after the idea of a witch became gender-related to women and the stereotype of a witch that of an elderly and dangerous woman. The exact origin of this stereotype is not known. Yet it led to the deaths of thousands of women during the late Middle Ages; it is believed that more than 80% of executed witches were women.

Various theories exist that try to explain how women became an enemy of society at this time along with more “traditional” enemies such as Jews and Protestants. Some think that the witch image derived from the many representations of savage women known from folklore. Others trace it back to attitudes towards women, like Aristotle’s view of women as imperfect humans.

This paper is going to suggest another possible source: female monsters from Greek mythology, such as the Keres, the Lamia, Scylla, the Harpies and Medusa. While drawing from different myths they share common characteristics as women who were infertile, physically monstrous and totally destructive. This paper will examine several key aspects of these monsters and what they signified to the Greeks to see how they might have influenced the later witch stereotype.

Keywords: infertile, monstrous, stereotype, witch

1. Introduction

The Catholic Church never had much trouble finding enemies; some of the many groups that the Church waged war on included the Jews, Cathars and Muslims. For the Church each of these represented different faces of heresy. However in 1484, Pope Innocent VIII issued a papal bull declaring the existence of a new enemy who became known as witches.¹ A mere two years later, the monks Kramer and Sprenger, in their work entitled the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), in no uncertain terms gave the witch the form of a woman and soon the image of a witch became that of an old and threatening woman.

In some ways this new enemy is a little more difficult to understand than the more traditional ones, as it doesn't have any religious or philosophical foundation, although the implied crime is the same. Also, it is rare in western history for the idea of an enemy of society to be gender-related to women. Many theories abound to try and explain how this link between witches and women came about. Some suggest that the stereotype of the witch could have been based on the many negative representations of women popular in folklore, such as the wild women who were thought to live in medieval forests.² Another theory suggests women were easier targets as they had less status and money than men, particularly unmarried women and widows.³ Or perhaps the image derives from the Aristotelean belief, still widely accepted at this period, in the woman as an imperfect human and so in a Christian mindset more prone to evil.⁴

In this paper I would like to put forward another possible source to help explain this phenomenon: female monsters from Greek mythology, figures such as the Gorgons, Sirens, Harpies and Lamia. First of all, this paper will examine several key features in the portrayal of these mythological monsters and their significance to the ancient Greeks. Next, it will study how the witch image is similar to these Greek monsters. Finally, this paper will question whether these Greek figures can provide a possible explanation as to why the face of evil became that of an old and dangerous woman in the late Middle Ages. It is possible that the answer lies in attitudes to female fertility.

2. Infertile women as monsters in Greek mythology

Greek myth was populated with dozens of monstrous women.

While today they are often labelled as monsters, the majority were in fact goddesses. They were considered ancient even by the Greeks as they predated Olympian deities and they had existed in Greek thought many centuries before the Greeks started to write about them from the eighth century BC. They are found in many different myths and today they survive mainly in the early writings of Homer, Hesiod and Pindar, the plays of Euripides and Aeschylus, as well as in art. Even if they belong to different myths, they are usually perceived as a group as they share a number of common traits. For instance, they are all women who cannot bear children, they are physically monstrous and they are destructive.

Their most significant trait is their inability to bear children. There were a number of reasons for this. One scholar notices that Greek monsters tended to be either girls or old women, in other words women outside their childbearing years.⁵ Many of these women are old, and specifically old maids, such as the Moirai, Empousa, Lamia, Graiai and Erinyes.⁶ The Graiai, which means Old Women in Greek, are represented on vase paintings as

lovely maidens with white hair.⁷ Yet in literature they are described as three old virgins with the body of a swan, who share one eye and one tooth between them and who never see the sunlight.⁸

However infertility was not always due to age. There are two versions of the Lamia myth. In one version, the Lamia became infertile as result of divine punishment. The Lamia was a beautiful woman who had an affair with Zeus. The wife of Zeus, Hera, punished her by taking away her ability to bear children and to sleep. Once infertile, she withdrew to a cave and became a monster. Zeus, feeling sorry for her, gave her the ability to remove her eyes.⁹

Second, every effort was made, especially in literature, to depict them as hideous and monstrous. In some cases they appear sickly or diseased like Achlus, or Sorrow, who is pale, squalid, has swollen knees and rheum flows from her nose and blood from her cheeks.¹⁰ The Erinyes or Curses are described by Aeschylus as having foul air blasting from their nostrils and ooze dripping from their eyes.¹¹ According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary, monstrous is defined as “abnormally formed”.¹² In some cases, like the Graiai and Lamia mentioned above, they have deformities that make them frightening to behold.

One of the ways that they differed from the later Olympian deities was that they were only part human. Olympian deities, like Zeus, Aphrodite and Poseidon, were anthropomorphous, although they were able to change form at will, either into a mortal or an animal. Whereas these more ancient deities were usually part-human and part-animal in form. The animals most commonly used in the description of these goddesses were birds and snakes, although other animals occur. The ancient Greeks believed that birds and snakes were able to travel between the worlds of the living and the dead.¹³ This could be the reason that they were chosen in the depiction of these goddesses, who as we will see later, were usually linked to death.

For example, two of these figures, the Echidna and the second version of the Lamia are half-snake and half-woman.¹⁴ Also several of these figures have snakes instead of hair. The most famous of these is the Gorgon Medusa.¹⁵ But it is also a trait of the Erinyes.¹⁶ Famous bird women include the Sirens and Harpies. The Sirens were birds with the head of a woman, and often a female bust and arms. Whereas the Harpies tended to be winged women.¹⁷ On the Harpy tomb in the British Museum, the Harpies are portrayed as having the torso, head and arms of a woman while the rest of the body is that of a bird. They are represented carrying the bodies of the dead which they hold in their arms and with their taloned feet.

Third, these monster women were totally destructive and their victims were men, children or crops. They borrowed more than just the physical appearance of animals, they also took on the behaviour of a savage beast. The Keres were winged black creatures with large white teeth and long, sharp fingernails. They appeared in Hesiod's work as vampire-like women who fight over corpses lying slain on the battlefield in order to suck their blood.¹⁸ The bloodthirstiness and aggression of the women in this image, also found in Homer's *Iliad*, is reminiscent of a hungry animal tearing apart its prey.¹⁹

Some of these creatures specifically attacked children. In the first version of the Lamia myth, the Lamia represents the misery of a woman who cannot bear children of her own and attacks and kills the children of others. Likewise, a creature called the Gello was believed to be the soul of a young girl from Lesbos who died young and took to stealing children.²⁰ And some of the monsters destroyed crops. It was believed that the Erinyes could fly over the land in order to drop venom from their hearts onto the soil, killing both the crops and children.²¹

These women are not evil in the way that we understand the term. They are destructive by nature as they personify negative aspects of the human condition such as death or forms of death like war and disease. The Keres or Fates were the three women who cut the threads of human life.²² There were three Graiai, who are sometimes confused with the Keres, and their names were Enyo (War), Pemphredo (Wasp) and Dino (Terror). The Erinyes or Curses were the avengers of wrongful murder and they tormented murderers with guilt and madness. While other figures represented marine dangers that sailors encountered such as Scylla (the Flayer) and Charybdis (Whirlpool).

3. The importance of fertility to the ancient Greeks

Why did the Greeks represent death and misfortune as an infertile old woman? To answer that we have to look at the place of women in Greek society. Women were valued for their fertility, particularly their ability to bear sons to their husbands. However, there is reason to believe that fertility was their only role in society, in part because there is so little evidence suggesting that women participated in the public sphere. Respectable women were not portrayed in literature which was based largely on "myths from the remote past".²³ Therefore all of the women found in Greek literature are either mythological or disreputable. Nor was it allowed to say the name of a respectable woman in public.²⁴ The only women to go out in public unaccompanied were prostitutes, non-citizen women or old women, whose honour no longer needed to be safeguarded.

Further evidence corroborates this grim picture. There are many references to a *gunaikon*, or women's quarters, which was an inner room in Greek houses.²⁵ It is believed that respectable married women were confined to this section of the house which had no external door. In the words of one scholar: "As a multitude of historians have noted, the status of women in classical Greece ranks among the worst of women in western society at any time."²⁶ It is not known if their lives were really this terrible. But the almost total absence of women in the public sphere lends itself to this sort of conjecture.

The fertility of women was important for a second reason. Women were also responsible for the fertility of the land and they were expected to participate in religious festivals to ensure a good yield of crops. For example, they worshipped Demeter, the goddess of the earth, in a three-day fertility rite called the Thesmophoria. Rites like this appeared to have several meanings for the participants. They were to help mark a girl's transition to marriage and motherhood. But they were also to harness women's reproductive powers to promote the fertility of society.²⁷ Some scholars have suggested that this participation in religious festivals was the only time married women were permitted outside the house.²⁸

The emphasis on fertility might seem a bit extreme to us but it was based on a stark reality. In our world of overpopulation and overproduction it is a timely reminder that the survival of ancient societies was precarious. Two things could lead to the disappearance of a race. Society would die out if women did not bear enough children or if the crops failed. Greek mythology was not merely a collection of stories passed on from generation to generation for the purpose of entertaining. It also served to educate and teach people their role in society. So, for women it provided role models like Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, who sat at home weaving for 20 years while she waited faithfully for her husband to return from the Trojan War. And her opposite were these monstrous women who could not create life and therefore could only destroy it. The message was not particularly subtle although it might well have been effective.

4. The witch as an infertile and dangerous woman

Now let's consider the later stereotype of the witch. According to court records from the period of the witch persecutions, anybody (man or woman, young or old) could be accused and executed as a witch. The image of a witch, however, is much more defined. This image resembles the Greek monster women because both are representations of an old and dangerous woman. Research carried out on court records gives the following image of a typical witch in Scotland: "She [a witch] was most likely a mature female, though not necessarily elderly or solitary. She was likely to be at the more

impoverished end of the village socio-economic scale, certainly poorer than those who accused her. She was likely to be quarrelsome. She might or might not have a reputation for healing as well as for harming, but above all she was deemed to have malevolent supernatural powers."²⁹

The witch stereotype, that you are I are both familiar with, is not as physically monstrous as the women found in Greek mythology. Although they both shared a special relationship with animals that may or may not have been coincidental. Witches were not winged like birds and yet they were believed to be able to fly through the air at will by means of a broomstick. Also witches were believed to have familiars in the form of animals. For instance, in Scotland leopards and hare were thought to be witches.³⁰ In England, cats were notoriously linked to witches along with toads, rats, wasps and butterflies.³¹ These Greek goddesses were associated with animals, both as a way of making them monstrous and also of stressing their threatening nature. For witches, the use of a broomstick and familiars helped to explain how women committed heinous crimes while sleeping next to their husbands at night.³²

Most discussion regarding witches focuses not on the witch as an old woman but simply as a woman. This is because in many cultures where witch beliefs are present, the witch is traditionally old and deformed – but not usually female.³³ Therefore this aspect of the European witch-hunts is uncommon and has led to the idea that the European witch image can be seen as a negative standard for women.³⁴ This standard stresses the character traits of women more than their fertility. Certain traits were considered acceptable for women and others, which were unacceptable, became associated with witches. This defining of good and bad qualities of women can be seen in some of the earliest anti-witch books where it is extensively argued that women are unfaithful, ambitious and lusty.³⁵ And scholars studying the witch-hunts today also notice that hostility was shown at this time towards women who had traits, either associated normally with men, such as aggression and independence, or who did not fulfil functions appropriate to women like caring for children, men or the weak.³⁶

But many perceive the witch specifically as an old woman. The association with old age can be found in various works and images from this period. Speaking about English witches, one scholar comments that they were “predictably old, poor and female”.³⁷ One man, writing in 1736, observed that: “They [witches] are usually such as are destitute of friends, bowed down with years, laden with infirmities.”³⁸ The witch as an old crone is one of the more persistent aspects of the witch-hunts to survive to today. We continue to see the popularity of the witch as old, wrinkled and scowling

woman every Halloween, in Disney cartoons or films like the Wizard of Oz. It is only very recently, say in the past ten years, that on television that some witches began to be portrayed as beautiful, young women.

Like Greek monsters, the witch was an idea of a woman who was actively seeking to destroy the fabric of society by attacking men, babies and crops. Greek monsters were personifications of death and misfortune, whereas witches were a scapegoat for any crime imaginable. What is interesting is that the alleged activities of witches were the same seen associated with these mythological monster women. In the papal bull of 1484, Pope Innocent VIII describes their crimes as follows. Witches are those who: "...[commit] enormities and horrid offences, have slain infants yet in their mother's wombs, as also the offspring of cattle, have blasted the produce of the earth, the grapes of the vine [...] they hinder men from performing the sexual act and women from conceiving....".³⁹

These same accusations occur over and over again. In Scotland and England misfortunes were frequently blamed on witchcraft and this included unexpected deaths, the failure of crops, the drying up of milk, both human and animal, and disasters at sea.⁴⁰ In one case, the sister-in-law of Elspeth Thomson did not invite her to the christening of her child. When the sister-in-law's milk failed and the child died, then Elspeth was blamed.⁴¹ This similarity between witches and Greek monsters is not lost on some scholars who describe these Greek monsters using the term 'witch'. The Lamia is one of the creatures which one scholar perceives as a witch-figure along with the Mormo and other such women in Greek myth.⁴²

5. Limitations of this explanation

However, there are a couple of problems in trying to associate mythological monsters from ancient Greece and the witch stereotype from the late Middle Ages. For one, it is not possible to know if these Greek monsters were a key influence, or any influence at all on the later stereotype of a witch. As I said earlier, other representations of nasty old women existed in folklore and myth throughout the centuries and any of them could have been a source. What we do know is that witch hunters and the authors of anti-witch literature were familiar with these Greek monsters. Roman authors of the early Empire were fascinated with Greek mythology and often included descriptions of these figures in their works. They are described in the *Aeneid* of Virgil and the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, both of which were popular reading in the Middle Ages. While figures like the wild women belong strictly to the realm of superstition and folklore, classical literature was the foundation of education in the Middle Ages and had a considerable impact on the thinking and beliefs of this period.⁴³

Second, the ancient Greeks were not the only people to fear for the survival of their race. The importance of these two things - procreation and crops – to any society means that in fact most enemies of society, regardless of culture, tend to be accused of committing these types of crimes. In ancient Rome, the Pythagoreans were disliked fervently and were frequently exiled or executed. Cicero attacked a man, known to be a Pythagorean, by implying that this man sacrifices boys in order to divine the future from their entrails.⁴⁴ In Europe in the 1100s the murder of children became a frequent charge against Jews who were the objects of persecution at that time.⁴⁵

What I am trying to suggest is that Greek figures specifically link these types of crimes, like infanticide and crop destruction, with women and particularly infertile women. And in these monster women, the Greeks created one of the most powerful and lasting images of a threatening female. Can they provide an explanation or at very least a pre-existing context to explain why an enemy of society became a woman? Perceiving the witch stereotype as an infertile woman could help us to understand the witch image and how the hunt for witches became gender-related to women. In the 13th century the Church was actively seeking out forms of heresy. In these Greek monsters we have an ancient idea of the unacceptable – in this case a standard of behaviour for women that had existed for thousands of years. Here was a convenient, well-known, ready-made idea of a dangerous woman, and it could have been easily repackaged and sold to the public as a heretic or an enemy of society.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, did these representations of monstrous women from Greek mythology play a part in the thinking of those who hunted down and executed witches? It is always possible, but if it did it would only have been one thread in a complex tapestry of possible reasons and explanations as to why “the stereotype of a witch is that of a woman”.⁴⁶ And it still does not explain why all of a sudden this image of female infertility and the ideas behind it, which are thousands of years old, took hold at this particular time.

Of course, for many of us today, especially in Europe and North America, the figure of the infertile woman has lost its power. This could be because we not only live longer on average than our ancient counterparts, but also we tend to accept that women can contribute other things to society besides their ability to bear children. Having said that, I would like to leave you with a quote of Shintaro Ishihara, who is the current Mayor of Tokyo. He said: “It is futile as well as criminal for women to continue living after they have lost their reproductive ability.”⁴⁷

Bibliography

- Bremmer, J., 'The old women of Ancient Greece', in *Sexual Asymmetry*, Blok, J., and Mason, P., (eds), Amsterdam, 1987.
- Burkert, W., *Greek Religion*. Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford, 1985.
- Fantham, E., Foley, H.P., Kampen, N.B., Pomeroy, S.B. and Shapiro, H.A. (eds), *Women in the Classical World*. Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Grimal, P., *Dictionnaire de la Mythologie Grecque et Romaine*. Paris, 1963.
- Harrison, J., *Prolegomena to the study of Greek Religion*. Cambridge University Press, 1903.
- Henderson, J., 'Older Women in Attic Old Comedy'. *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. 117, 1987, pp. 105-129.
- Kraemer, R.S., 'Ecstasy and Possession: the attractions of women to the cult of Dionysus'. *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 72, 1979, pp. 55-80.
- Larner, C., *Enemies of God*. Chatto and Windus, London, 1981.
- Larner, C., *Witchcraft and Religion*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984.
- Moore, R.I., *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 2007.
- Pollard, J., *Birds in Greek Life and myth*. Thames and Hudson, 1977.
- Reynolds, L.D. and Wilson, N.G., *Scribes and Scholars*. Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Rohde, E., *Psyche*. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, London, 1925.
- Russell, J.B., *A History of Witchcraft*. Thames and Hudson, London, 1980.
- Smith, C., 'Harpies in Greek Art'. *Journal of Hellenistic Studies*, vol. 13, 1892-3, pp. 103-114.
- Summers, M., *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger*. Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1971.
- Skyes, J.B., (ed) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Thomas, K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Weidenfield and Nicholson, London, 1971.
- Vermeule, E., *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*. University of California Press, 1979.

¹ For the Papal Bull, see M Summers, *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger*, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1971, pp.29-32.

² JB Russell, *A History of Witchcraft*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1980, p.50.

³ *ibid.*, p.113.

⁴ C Lerner, *Enemies of God*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1981, p.92.

⁵ J Bremmer, 'The old women of Ancient Greece', in *Sexual Asymmetry*, J. Blok & P. Mason, P (eds), Amsterdam, 1987, p.203.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.203.

⁷ J Harrison, *Prolegomena to the study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1903, p.194.

⁸ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, lines 794-799.

⁹ P Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la Mythologie Grecque et Romaine*, Paris, 1963, pp.249-250.

¹⁰ Hesiod, *Shield of Herakles*, line 78.

¹¹ Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, lines 53-54.

¹² JB Skyes (ed), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford University Press, 1983, s.v. monstrous.

¹³ For birds see J Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and myth*, Thames and Hudson, 1977, p.189 and for snakes Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 236 and W Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford, 1985, pp. 193 and 195.

¹⁴ For Echidna, see Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 295-305 and for the second version of the Lamia, see Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 4.25.

¹⁵ Pindar, *Pythian Ode*, 12.9-10.

¹⁶ Euripides, *Orestes*, 256.

¹⁷ C Smith, 'Harpies in Greek Art', *Journal of Hellenistic Studies*, vol. 13, 1892-3, p. 103.

¹⁸ Hesiod, *Shield of Herakles*, lines 252-260.

¹⁹ Homer, *Iliad*, 18.535-540.

²⁰ E Rohde, *Psyche*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, London, 1925, p. 594.

²¹ Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, lines 780-785.

²² One scholar describes the Keres as personifications of battlefield panic and noise, see E Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*. University of California Press, 1979, p. 39.

²³ E Fantham, HP Foley, NB Kampen, SB Pomeroy, and HA Shapiro (eds), *Women in the Classical World*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 69.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁶ RS Kraemer, 'Ecstasy and Possession: the attractions of women to the cult of Dionysus', *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 72, 1979, p. 74.

²⁷ Fantham and Foley, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁹ C Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984, pp. 72-3.

-
- ³⁰ C Larner, *Enemies of God*. Chatto and Windus, London, 1981, p. 10.
- ³¹ K Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Weidenfield and Nicholson, London, 1971, p. 530.
- ³² Larner, *Enemies of God*, p. 10.
- ³³ Larner, *ibid*, pp. 9-10.
- ³⁴ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, p. 62.
- ³⁵ M Summers, *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger*, Dover Publications Inc, New York, 1971, pp. 111-125.
- ³⁶ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, pp. 62 and 84.
- ³⁷ Larner, *ibid*, p. 50.
- ³⁸ K Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 671.
- ³⁹ translation by M Summers, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
- ⁴⁰ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, p. 74.
- ⁴¹ Larner, *ibid*, p. 73.
- ⁴² J Henderson, 'Older Women in Attic Old Comedy', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. 117, 1987, pp. 126-127.
- ⁴³ LD Reynolds and NG Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 110.
- ⁴⁴ Cicero, *In Vatinium*, 14.
- ⁴⁵ RI Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 2007, pp.34-36.
- ⁴⁶ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, p. 62.
- ⁴⁷ Financial Times, 29-30 March 2008, Life and Arts, p.3.