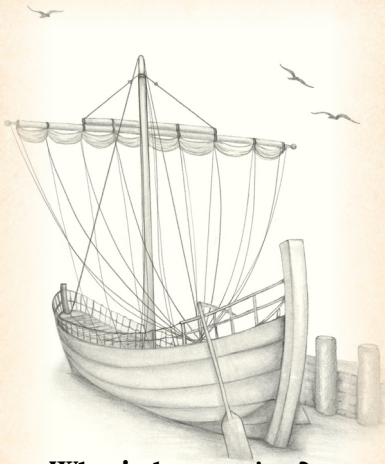




Historically Speaking

Volume 3, Number 11 November 2024

Witches



What's happening?

Audrey and I had a booth in the University Craft Fair last weekend (Oct. 19&20.) Audrey sold quilts and other sewn items. I sold woodworking items and books. We were delighted that Kristi Stalder, Caleb Palmquist, and Kim Verdone also had a couple booths. We all were pleased with the outcome of the fair, and several books were sold. Ridgeline High School Craft Fair will be Dec. 7&8. I am trying to renew some stock on the woodworking items (still have plenty of books available.) This will end the woodworking season and I will get back to the writing season.

The witches and sorceresses in Greek mythology are different from the traditional European and American concept of a witch. While ancient Greek does not have a word that directly translates as “witch,” it does have “pharmakis” (someone who gives out drugs or medicine), “aoidos” (singer, enchantress) and “graus” or “graia” (old woman). In ancient Rome a witch may be called a cantatrix or praecatrix, a sacerdos or vates. She may also be docta, divina, saga, and maga, a venefica, malefica, lamia, lupula, strix, or striga. Both ancient civilizations have significant myths involving witches by whatever name they may use.

Hecate (Hekate) is a goddess of Greek mythology capable of both good and evil. She was associated with witchcraft, magic, the moon, doorways, and creatures of the night like hell-hounds and ghosts.

Medea, Circe, and the Stygian Witches are the most commonly known witches of Greek mythology. **Medea** and **Circe** are found in Roman mythology as well as **Deianira** and **Simaetha**. There are others in both cultures.

From the Oxford Academic website:

"From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and the Roman Witch in Classical literature.

ABSTRACT

This chapter traces images of the witch, such as Circe or Medea, in Greek and Roman literature. By delineating differences between witches in the two cultures and situating the portraits in their historical contexts it illuminates the ideological work that ideas of witches perform. Roman literature, for example, depicts sorceresses with more detail and verisimilitude than Greek literature does, situating them firmly in the real world. Roman witches are not characters from mythology removed from reality by time and divine parentage, but are portrayed as women one might encounter in the market on any day. The witch serves various roles in Greek and Roman imagination: she represents popular fears and fantasies either as a magical helpmate to the male hero in Greek mythology, or as a destructive, emasculating force in Roman literature, where she functions as a negative model for proper female comportment."

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Medea is found in the myth of Jason and the Argonauts (the *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes.) As is the case with some of the witches in both Greek and Roman mythology, she is a very beautiful woman.

She is the daughter of King Aeëtes of Colchis, yet she aids Jason in his search for the Golden Fleece. She later marries him, but eventually kills their children as he takes another bride according to some versions of her story. Medea is known in most stories as a sorceress and is often depicted as a priestess of the goddess Hecate. She first appears in Hesiod's *Theogony* around 700 BCE, but is best known from Euripides's tragedy *Medea* in addition to the *Argonautica*.

As a daughter of King Aeëtes she is a mythical granddaughter of the sun god Helios and a niece of Circe, an enchantress goddess. In *Argonautica*, she uses her magic to save Jason's life and kills her brother to allow Jason to escape. Once he finishes his quest, she abandons her native home of Colchis and flees westwards with Jason, where they eventually settle in Corinth and marry.

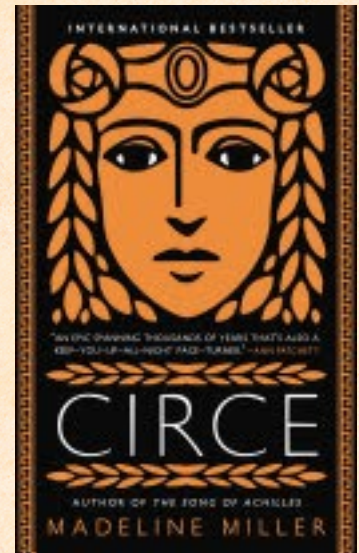
Euripides's 5th-century BC tragedy *Medea* depicts the ending of her union with Jason, when after ten years of marriage, Jason intends to abandon her to wed King Creon's daughter Creusa. Jason argues that their sons will have a better future in the city if he marries the King's daughter and his sons stay in the same city with him. He claims the sacred vows he has with Medea can be broken because she is a foreigner, which makes their marriage illegitimate. Medea is exiled from Corinth by King Creon, and is offered refuge in Athens by King Aegeus after she offers to help him get an heir with her magic.

In revenge against Jason, Medea murders her own sons and Jason's new bride, King Creon's daughter, with a poisoned crown and robes, so that Jason will be without heir and legacy for the rest of his life. What happens afterwards varies according to several accounts.

Herodotus in his *Histories*, mentions that she ended up leaving Athens and settling in the Iranian plateau among the Aryans, who subsequently changed their name to the Medes.

Circe, in Greek legend, a sorceress, the daughter of Helios, the sun god, and of the ocean nymph Perse. She was able by means of drugs and incantations to change humans into wolves, lions, and swine. The Greek hero Odysseus visited her island, Aeaea, with his companions, whom she changed into swine. But Odysseus, protected by the herb moly (a gift from Hermes), compelled her to restore them to their original shape. He stayed with her for one year before resuming his journey. The story is told by Homer in the *Odyssey*, Books X and XII. Greco-Roman tradition placed her island near Italy or located her on Mount Circeo.

I recommend reading Madeline Miller's *CIRCE* for an interesting expansion of this sorceresses story.



Medea murdering one of her children, neck amphora, c. 330 BC, Louvre.

