

# How To Be A Witch!

...in the Greek and Roman times.

By Daniel Ogden

Almost everything we love about modern horror movies and the Harry Potter novels derives from stories about magic and ghosts told in the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome.

The surviving literature of Classical antiquity bristles with horrible witches, mysterious wizards, terrifying ghosts, curses, voodoo-dolls, even werewolves, vampires and zombies. Here we'll look at some of the earliest imaginary descriptions of witches and wizards in the western tradition, and try to get a glimpse of what lay behind them.

We find the first 'wicked witch of the west' in the figure of Circe in Homer's *Odyssey*, the Greek epic poem composed in the seventh century BC. Circe turns Odysseus' men into pigs by feeding them a magic potion and striking them with her wand. She then pens them up in sties, no doubt ultimately to suffer the usual fate of kept pigs... to be eaten. She attempts to do the same to Odysseus himself, but he is able to protect himself against her magic because he possesses a spe-

cial herb, which he uses either as an antidote or as a sort of protective amulet. Circe knows when she's beaten, and having failed to turn Odysseus into a pig, she embarks upon a romance with him that endures for a year. In the course of Homer's tale we learn about other powers Circe has: she is a mistress of love magic, a mistress of necromancy (the art of making ghosts predict the future), and she can teleport herself through space instantaneously and unseen.

Circe's sister Medea was also well known as a witch. She has a starring role in the third-century BC Greek epic by Apollonius of Rhodes, the *Argonautica* or 'Voyage of the Argo'. This is the text that inspired Ray Harryhausen's film *Jason and the Argonauts*, although her role in the movie version is reduced to little more than that of a romantic heroine. In the *Argonautica* and other ancient texts we find her using her magic to help Jason steal the golden fleece. The fleece is guarded by a terrible unsleeping dragon, but Medea can use herbs to inflict sleep upon it whilst Jason makes off with the prize. She can also use her drugs to restore to old men their lost youth. **She does this by chopping the 'patient' up into parts and boiling them in her cauldron with the relevant magical ingredients.** Having reinvigorated Jason's father in this way, she then deceitfully offers to do the same for the evil Pelias. Pelias' daughters eagerly chop him up in anticipation, but Medea accidentally-on-purpose omits to put the key magical ingredients into the brew, and instead of a rejuvenated Pelias his daughters are left with the realisation that they have just killed their father... and soup. In later life Jason abandons Medea for a new girlfriend, Glauce, and Medea uses her magic to achieve her revenge. Pretending that she is reconciled to the new relationship, she sends Glauce a wedding dress. **But she has impregnated the dress with her special herbs, and as soon as Glauce tries it on, the dress explodes.** This last story is told in Euripides' fifth-century BC tragedy, *Medea*, which, for obvious reasons, is much admired by modern feminists.

Witches though they are, Medea and Circe are represented as attractive women, not as the sort of 'hag' witch we nowadays expect to find, warts and all, under a pointy hat. But this sort of witch too (not the pointy hat) originates in the lit-



erature of the ancient world, and she was particularly popular in Roman texts. The

**Romans tended to be much more 'gothic' in their tastes than the Greeks.** In the first-century BC poems of Horace we meet the marvellous Canidia and her witch-friends. She calls up ghosts by night in a graveyard to help her power her spells, which are almost always directed towards making unsuspecting handsome young men fall in love with her. In a striking scene, she and her accomplices kidnap a young boy and bury him up to his neck inside their house. They then starve him to death, whilst wafting delicious food in front of him, just out of reach of his mouth. The purpose? So that every part of his body will be suffused by a sense of longing and desire. **They can then dry out his liver as a sort of 'essence of desire', powder it and make a love potion out of it, with which, again, they can attract young men to themselves.**

In the following century the poet Lucan tells us in his *Pharsalia* about the horrid witch Erictho. Like Canidia, she uses parts of dead bodies for her various magical operations, and she goes about collecting them in gruesome ways. When she needs a particular muscle from the corpse of a criminal hanging on the gibbet, she bites into it and hangs her weight off it in order to detach it. Erictho's specialisation is necromancy, and her

technique is to reanimate corpses and compel them to speak. When a client wants to know the outcome of the current war, she takes a corpse from a battlefield and pumps it full of magical ingredients from her cauldron. She then makes the corpse's ghost appear beside it, but it refuses to re-enter the body until she issues threats and whips the corpse with snake. Once the ghost has re-entered the stiff body, it leaps directly to its feet without bending its limbs, in a symbolic gesture of the return to life.

Perhaps the greatest of witches in Roman literature is Meroe, who makes a memorable appearance in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, written in the second century AD. She again is a hag who devotes most of her energies to making young men fall in love with her. She comes from Thessaly, traditional home of witches in the ancient world. **She is an expert in 'binding' magic and we learn that she has sealed a baby into its mother's womb for nine years.** She enslaves a young man, Socrates (not to be confused with the philosopher) to her by sleeping with him just once. When Socrates is rescued by a friend, Aristomenes, Meroe sets off in pursuit with an equally horrid companion, Panthia. They attack the hotel room in which the fugitives are holed up, bursting the door from its hinges. Meroe slits Socrates' throat as he sleeps and draws his heart out through the wound, but then she reanimates him temporarily by replacing the organ with a magical sponge. Before they leave the room they empty their bladders over the terrified Aristomenes, who has been hiding under the bed. As they depart, the door is magically restored to its hinges. Aristomenes is amazed, in his terror, to find Socrates seemingly still alive, but the following day, as the friend takes a drink of water, the sponge leaps out of his throat and he is left well and truly dead, for good, this time, whilst the finger of blame for his murder points towards Aristomenes.

