

Witches Flight

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On March 20, 1650, in Tlalpuxagua, to the north of what is today Zitácuaro, Michoacán, the Inquisition heard the testimony of “a woman named Juana . . . , who havin’ given birth and bein’ visited by said Agustina, who hovered greatly over the baby, and that night she had suckled her and in the dawn, the baby was all sucked dry and that day it died.” This quote from the Inquisition’s archives allows us to conjecture that witches were similar on both sides of the Atlantic.¹ Must we accept that they came in droves along with misogynist soldiers and evangelists? Too frequently the term “cultural syncretism” is used to talk about this topic; a careful review shows that different elements that go in to delineating the idea of the witch manifested themselves independently of each other in Europe and Mexico. Without denying the synthesis of the two cultures, it is worth asking why we find things that correlate and are even identical regarding a topic whose development was parallel and uncontaminated until the time of the Conquest.

THE WITCH IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Philostratus of Athens, the second-century biographer of Apollonius of Tyana, attributed to the latter the curious story of Menippus, a young philosopher’s apprentice who, less concerned about wisdom than pleasure, could not—or did not want to—escape from the charms of a beautiful, unknown woman who came up to him on the walls of Corinth. At his wedding banquet, the Sophist himself warned the



Herbert James Draper, *The Lamia*, 1909 (oil on canvas).

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Francisco de Goya, *Pretty Teacher*, "Whims" series no. 68, ▶ 1799, 21.4 x 15 cm (dry point, burnished etching).



boy that he was marrying a monster. The lamia, unmasked, finally revealed that she had seduced the young man to be able to drink all the blood from his body.²

The Greek myth of Lamia—or of the *lamiae*—dates from before the first century when Apollonius lived, and may well be the first known mention of a witch. She was a maiden, the daughter of the nymph Libya and the grandson of Poseidon, who, when she became pregnant by Zeus, awakened the jealousy of Hera; the spurned wife got her revenge by killing Lamia's children. The grieving mother hid away in a cave where pain and envy turned her into a monster; other versions suggest that Hera herself turned her into a witch. In any case, the unhappy Lamia then began to hunt down infants to drink their blood. The *Diccionario de mitología clásica* (Dictionary of Classical Mythology) states that “nurses used this story to frighten children.”³

Ovid describes the old crone, Dipsas, who in addition to knowing the properties of herbs and the venom of the mare in heat, is able by simple force of will to bring the clouds together and redden the face of the Moon. He writes of her, “I suspect that, transformed into a bird, she flies through the shadows of the night, and that her old woman's body is cov-

ered with feathers,” adding, “Out of the double pupil of her eyes shine beams and a sparkling light emerges from both eyeballs.”⁴

The same author refers to the existence of fearful birds that “fly by night and attack children left helpless by their nurse. . . . They say that they disembowel anyone still breast-feeding and their jaws are full of the blood they drink. They are called *striges*.” A few lines further, he wonders “if these birds are born or . . . engendered by the spells of the old women spell-casters.”⁵

Propertius and Horace also write of the *strix* or *striga*, who they consider rapacious, merciless, and plumed, giving them a feminine face.

Apuleius narrates the metempsychosis of Pamphilē, who uses an ointment and whispers an incantation to turn herself into an ominous bird: “After an imperceptible waving movement, she points a soft hairy member that she develops on the moment and turns into stiff feathers; her nose becomes beaked and hardens; the nails become powerful talons. Pamphilē is now an owl.”⁶ This passage is similar to the previous ones, but now the intention is to make the reader laugh: the protagonist applies an ointment, but instead of turning into a bird, she turns into an ass.

THE MEDIEVAL WITCH

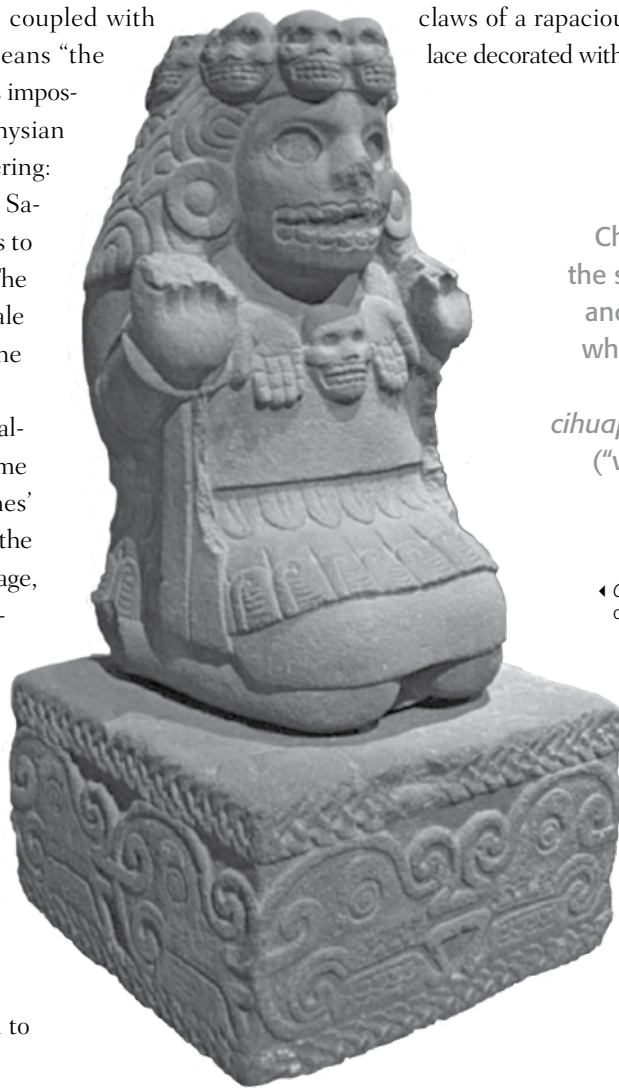
The onset of Christianity, with its delirious idea of a world as the battlefield for the combat between Good and Evil, changed and diversified the old idea of a witch. It transformed it without obliterating it, and accepted that it was rooted in pagan soil. The followers of Bacchus, who in the Eleusian mysteries of Ceres and Bacchus celebrated the fertility of the land and women, served as the basis for the new paradigm.

In addition to drunkenness or “the divine madness,” the rites included the consumption of psychotropic drugs, collective, incessant dancing, and the sacrifice of small animals that were eaten raw, covering the celebrants’ bodies with blood. Men’s participation was forbidden and the place in the forest where the ceremony took place was secret. In addition to the reproduction of grain and humans, the cult sought “enthusiasm,” which the initiates coupled with the divinity because the word literally means “the entry of god.” This implied blessedness. It is impossible not to note the similarity of the Dionysian rite to the medieval witches’ coven gathering: suffice it to replace the pagan deities with Satan, who the witches would give themselves to in the orgy in order to acquire his powers. The representation of the Fallen Angel as a male goat corresponds to the erotic figures of the Satyrs and Pan.

In the deliberate or fortuitous use of hallucinogens like belladonna or henbane, some have sought the explanation of the witches’ flight; in its being applied by a broomstick, the genesis of their airborne mount. Add old age, which turns wisdom into the telltale toothless face and warts; the knowledge of hidden herbal medicine, and the secret language to rule the beasts and nightly powers; the vocation for changing the course of love by uniting or separating couples on a whim or for money; the barbaric repair of virgins or the magical restitution of the hymen; the disposition to evil and the capacity to turn oneself into an animal, particularly a black cat, and we have the witch that arrived from Spain to the New World.

THE WITCH IN MEXICO

Centuries before the conquest, the Aztecs created a beautiful, bloody religion based on the principle of duality. The noblewomen who died in childbirth of their firstborn were considered deities, comparable to warriors fallen in combat. Childbirth was seen as the struggle between life and death, and women who succumbed during that battle became *cihuapipiltin* (“noble women or ladies”), or *cihuateteo* (“women goddesses”).⁷ However, while the combatants survived in the form of butterflies, these tragic women had a different fate. They dwelled in the western part of Heaven,⁸ and from there they went out to meet the Sun at its zenith to dress it in its *quetzalapancaoyotl*, the armor given to victorious warriors, and then take it to its lowest point.⁹ Then, following a rigorous calendar, the *cihuapipiltin* could visit the earth. Transformed into skeletons with livid faces, the claws of a rapacious bird, and dressed in lace decorated with bones, “these goddess-



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◀ *Cihuateteo*, National Museum of Anthropology and History.

Francisco Reséndiz Machón



Mexican bench from the *Templo Mayor* (High Temple) site, National Museum of Anthropology and History.

es flew together through the air . . . and made little girls and boys sick.”¹⁰

The similarity of this passage to the archaic figure of Lamia is clear: in both cases the women fly and attack other women’s children after losing their own; in both cases the myth is born of an individual goddess who breaks up without losing herself in the multiplicity of beings: Cihuateteo is simultaneously the goddess of women who die in childbirth and each of them in their plurality, which can also be said of Lamia and the *lamiae*.

Another pre-Hispanic root of the witch is the “*tlahuipuchtli*, a term that means ‘the luminous incense burner.’ Colonial sources describe it as a kind of witch that frightened its enemies at night by blowing fire through its mouth, like a *nagual* (a kind of mythic sorcerer) with the ability to turn into animals and fire.”¹¹ Its feminine version is called *tlahuelpuchi*, and is still believed in in the Nahua communities in Central Mexico. She is attributed with the ability to fly as a bird (preferably a turkey or owl), and is also represented as an incandescent sphere. To survive, she absorbs the blood of children whose bodies are found at dawn with purplish toothmarks on their necks.

A vast array of legends exists about the *tlahuelpuchi* that vary the motives described above. In many cases, she is an ordinary woman who only at night takes on her demonic form. Frequently her state is ascribed to a curse that forces her to drink blood after her first menstruation and until her death; in other cases, it is supposed that her condition is the prod-

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uct of a rite detailed in oral histories: women kneel before the *tlecuil* (home) and bring their faces and hands close to the fire repeating, “without Jesus and without Saint Mary,” until they can put the hot coals on their eyes, offering the same effect as in Ovid. “According to my grandmothers’ stories, they could take off their legs and put on turkey legs, or their legs turned into turkey legs and they then flew out the window.”¹²

In another strictly indigenous version, the aspiring witch must sacrifice a black hen to the “Owners of the Caves,” deities who dominate the natural surroundings, inside a cave destined for their use, and beg to be given the abilities of a witch. That is, the ability to take her head off her body, which during the night rolls into the homes of her victims to suck their blood or breathe “bad air” into them.¹³ Other traditions state that the head does not roll, but turns into a bird, usually an owl. Whether by rolling or flying, the head must return and join the body before the dawn or it will never be able to. This is reminiscent of the vampire curse, to which it is undoubtedly related, as is that of the *cihuateteo*, who only can inhabit the earth in the shade of the night. In contrast with the Euro-

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God of death, National Museum of Anthropology and History.

The *cihuapiltin* could visit the earth, transformed into skeletons with livid faces, the claws of a rapacious bird, and dressed in lace decorated with bones. "These goddesses flew together through the air . . . and made little girls and boys sick."

pean witches, the *tlahuelpuchis* are almost always married; the stories in which they appear are almost always resolved when the husband realizes his wife's real nature and ensures that her head cannot be joined again to her body, putting salt in her neck or on the empty skin.

Hugo G. Nutini, to whom we owe a detailed study of the topic, observes that the witches' desire for blood increases in times of rain and cold, and that the majority of deaths happen between midnight and four in the morning.¹⁴ This should be taken under advisement: we wouldn't want to have our blood sucked by a witch. **NM**

NOTES

¹ "La bruja y el peyote. Agustina de las Nieves," Enrique Flores y Mariana Masera, comps., *Relatos populares de la Inquisición Novohispana* (Madrid: Gobierno de España-Consejo Superior de Investigación Científica-Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010), pp. 91-94.

² Filóstrato, *Vida de los sofistas*, IV, 25, "Biblioteca básica" no. 143 (Madrid: Gredos, 2002).

³ Constantino Falcón Martínez, Emilio Fernández-Galiano, and Raquel López Melero, *Diccionario de mitología clásica* vol. 2 (Mexico City: Alianza, 1989), p. 373.

⁴ Ovidio, *Amores*, I, 8, "Biblioteca básica" no. 66 (Madrid: Gredos, 2001), p. 23.

⁵ Ovidio, *Fastos*, VI, "Biblioteca básica" no. 68 (Madrid: Gredos, 2001), p. 207.

⁶ Apuleyo, *El asno de oro*, III, 21 (Valencia: Círculo de lectores, 1978), p. 169.

⁷ Cecilio A. Robelo, "Diccionario de mitología náhuatl," *Universia*, http://biblioteca.universia.net/html_bura/ficha/params/title/diccionario-mitologia-nahuatl/id/37910367.html, accessed July 2012.

⁸ The word for "west" is *cihuatlampa*, or "in the place of women." Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, "Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España," Chapter 10, *arteHistoria*, Junta de Castilla y de León, <http://www.artehistoria.jcyl.es/cronicas/contextos/10953.htm>, accessed July 2012.

¹¹ UNAM, "Diccionario enciclopédico de la medicina tradicional mexicana/tlahuelpuchi," *Biblioteca digital de la medicina tradicional mexicana*, <http://www.medicinatradicional.unam.mx/termino.php?l=1&t=Tlahuelpuchi>, accessed July 2012.

¹² "Las brujas de México," *Taringa!*, *Inteligencia colectiva*, <http://www.taringa.net/posts/paranormal/10773301/Las-Brujas-de-Mexico.html>, accessed July 2012.

¹³ For this topic in general, see Melina S. Bautista, *Leyendas de brujas, duendes y nagueles* (Mexico City: Selector, 2003), pp. 9-31; and Enrique Flores and Mariana Masera, op. cit., pp. 40-48.

¹⁴ UNAM, *Apud*, "Diccionario enciclopédico de la medicina tradicional mexicana/chupada de bruja," *Biblioteca digital de la medicina tradicional mexicana*, <http://www.medicinatradicional.unam.mx/termino.php?l=1&t=chupada%20de%20bruja>, accessed in July 2012.