

On the Etymology of the Witch: “Antimere” In the Tales

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Abstract

This research thesis in children's literature has as its theme an emblematic character of children's tales: the witch. Nowadays, this supernatural character is omnipresent in children's literature, and has been for several decades, as well as in the current wonderful universe, whether in cinema, through television series and cartoons, or even in novels. This character therefore appears in various works targeting all ages. It should also be noted that the globalization of the Halloween party has given rise in many countries to the development of witch costumes. However, this character to whom terrifying, repulsive and malicious characteristics and attributes have been attributed for generations has evolved a lot over the centuries.

Introduction. Since the 60s, the character of the witch has freed herself from these stereotypes, let's cite the TV series *My Beloved Witch*. In the 90s in particular, she reached the young public, especially on the screen, where we find her as a strong and independent woman, for example through the characters of Sabrina in *Sabrina the Sorceress* apprentice and the Halliwell sisters from the *Charmed Series*, or even in children's literature with the *Harry Potter* saga. More topical, we can mention recent cartoons such as the animated series *The Mini-sorceress* in which we find adventurous young witches brimming with energy. The archetype of the witch has often been hijacked in contemporary literature, in order to distance this character from the despicable criteria that were associated with her. We can then wonder if the predominance of the use of this effect in children's literature and in the current artistic universe could play a significant role on the representation of this character. Indeed, this character comes from a heritage culture, his representation as an atrocious character seems to be rooted in the common ideology. So, it is possible that these evolutions and these many new representations have led to new perceptions of this character. Thus, it seems interesting to wonder how the children who were born at the time of these new witches can perceive this character. We will then seek, through this thesis, to answer the following problem: How do today's children represent the character of the witch “antrimere”?

The starting hypothesis is that today's children are more familiar with the witches of contemporary children's literature, who hijack the old codes of a cruel and terrorizing witch. Indeed, it is assumed that children born in the XXI century have been immersed from an early age in contemporary witch stories, and continue to read stories featuring these witches of a new generation, through books from the end of the XXth century and much more current books, the quantity of which is constantly increasing. Of course, there are other plausible hypotheses: the children are still very imbued with the terrifying archetype of the witch, or else, they are aware that there are several types of witches, those who scare and others.

Discussion. The term “sorcerer” comes from the popular Latin *Sors* which designates an object of divination, and from *sortarius* which means “caster of spells”. It appears in the eighth century to quote a soothsayer who practices the drawing of lots. The term “witchcraft” for its part appeared only in the ninth century according to the ethnologist Hugues Berton⁶. The word “witch” appears in France only in the eleventh century in the anonymous manuscript of the *Novel* by Aeneas.

Previously, at the time of the High Middle Ages, the terms used to evoke witches are *masca*, *striga*, *stria*, *strix*. Some historians suggest that the origin of the word “witch” could come from *Striga*, which itself comes from the Latin *strix* and which refers to the owl or the barn owls, nocturnal birds with terrifying cries. The term “*Strige*” was used for a time to name witches. Before our era, he referred to *chimeras*, half-women, half-birds with a piercing cry. We find in particular these *striges*, flying women, in the procession of the goddess Hecate.

Indeed, magic and witchcraft have long been confused, and finally, witchcraft designated popular practices, poorly perceived, from poor social classes and isolated backgrounds.

The first notions of magic. Since prehistory, the notion of the abstract appears, through the first mortuary rites that suggest a belief in the afterlife. Luis T. Melgar cites the fact that men sought to explain then unexplainable phenomena such as the thunderstorm, by attaching them to forces or higher beings. They were looking for an invisible cause to natural facts.

Since classical antiquity, we find people mastering these supernatural elements. Among the Romans, an augur or a haruspices interpreted these natural phenomena as an omen, from the entrails of animals or the flight of birds. They were consulted officially at major events. There were figures of magicians in Hecate and Medea who were able to fly and who caused the misfortune of the enemies. Among the Celts, the priestesses invoked the forces of nature and cured diseases. In ancient Egypt, amulets and invocations were used to protect the royal tombs, and the goddess Isis resurrected the deceased. In sub-Saharan Africa, we find shamanism represented by healer shamans.

In Europe, many polytheistic religions are being established and pay tribute to nature. There were many fertility rites, offerings to the deities of nature, and festivals marking natural events such as the change of season. One of the most important cults was dedicated to Diana, it will continue for a long time in the Middle Age. He imposed nocturnal meetings, in particular through the cult of the nymph Egeria, magician and prophetess dressed as a goat. Ritual performances often required the wearing of masks or disguises to sport the appearance of animals, which gave an impression of metamorphoses. The cult of Diana was also attributed to Hecate, deity of magic and of the night, and priestess in witchcraft controlling specters. During these meetings with often cruel rites, spells were practiced. During the meetings, animals were killed and eaten, and knowledge of plants and their uses and magical arts¹⁹ was developed, such as making potions, divination, necromancy, astrology, malefices. The notion of “witch” does not yet exist, but will be a consequence of these cults. We then find *retiarii* or spellcasters, malefice or authors of malefices, and *striges* committing crimes in the form of nocturnal birds. According to Guy Bechtel, the evolution of magic at that time tends towards the appearance of the malefice (witch).

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, the witch is above all a midwife and a healer, heir to ancestral knowledge related to plants and her good knowledge of nature. It is mainly found in remote villages, where good hygiene is neglected. Namely that at the time, there were many dietary deficiencies and few notions of health prevention. The rural population calls on the witch to prepare remedies for infections, diseases, wounds, and to calm the pain. However, the plants used therapeutically as sedatives, sometimes turn out to be toxic or to be the cause of side effects. Witches are suspected of bewitchment, and then qualify them as fascinators, *striges* or *ostiaris*. Some people related strange facts of women using spells and transforming men for profit.

In Europe, pagan cults are deeply implanted, including the cults of Diana. Christianity is trying to impose itself in the face of polytheistic beliefs and the emergence of other religions. Her influence gradually imposed itself throughout this period and particularly marked the definition of witches. The old gods are questioned by the Christian Church, and perceived as demons. The worshippers of these are considered servants of the Devil. The many public practices that were admitted until then are declared to be occult and are the subject of prosecutions. Any form of magic is officially condemned. The practice of witchcraft therefore becomes clandestine. Despite these condemnations, the practice of witchcraft is increasing, the “new” religion is struggling to impose itself against the old rites. She tries to weaken the popular dogmas stemming from ancient religions by drawing inspiration from elements of pagan mythologies. Indeed, in Jacky Cordonnier’s work, relationships are established between Christian saints and certain pagan saints; the location of Christian places of worship seems to be determined near places revered by other cults, in particular chapels containing holy relics are built on the places of procession; relationships are established with respect to the choice of important dates and names, such as the correspondence between the designations and the births of Christ and Mithras, the solar god. According to Jacky Cordonnier, the objective is to reinforce the confusion between beliefs, to give meaning to religion, and thus to allow a better integration of Christian ceremonies. Indeed, the need is felt to recall old practices to promote understanding and acceptance of new beliefs.

At the end of the XIII century, the witch hunt begins. These represent people who persist in resorting to ancient secular rites and in taking an interest in the occult. His actions are not in accordance with the aspirations of the Church. They are accused of having signed a pact with Satan. The acts of witchcraft will be joined to the crimes of heresies in 1326. The Inquisition, which is a jurisdiction whose courts are religious, has the role of fighting against heresies, and will then take charge of its affairs. The persecutions of witches are formalized by the pope in 1484, resulting in a massive prosecution.. The peak of these persecutions is between 1580 and 1630. Indeed, in the sixteenth century, laws strengthen the process, through the Holy Office which succeeds the Inquisition. The religious courts cannot punish acts of witchcraft sufficiently consequently, these are considered a civil crime, so they are now the responsibility of the justice of the civil courts. Thus, witches can be executed for their wrongs. The trial is initiated by the prosecution, then the detention of the accused in a dungeon or a tower begins, his interrogation follows in order to obtain his confession, then in case of non-repentance, the accused is tortured. To free himself from the pain suffered, this act regularly ended in a false confession, as denounced by Friedrich von Spee, confessor of witches, in his work *Cautio Criminalis* published in 1631. The search for evidence of the guilt of the accused was carried out by checking the characteristics then attributed to the witches, as we have identified them in the following subpart. There was then a final interrogation phase to denounce the accomplices, and finally, the execution. The trial ended with a death sentence in the public square, by hanging, strangulation or decapitation, or more commonly in the case of heresy, by execution at the stake. In other words, an accused person seemed to have little chance of undoing himself and surviving this trial. Later, this witch hunt will also include denunciation, denunciations used to get rid of annoying women. Most of the denunciations were themselves motivated by personal or religious interest, especially in the context of the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, who accuse each other of witchcraft. Thus, the phenomenon of the witch hunt is amplified.

Analysis. This witch hunt will end during the seventeenth century, marked by the emergence of new currents of thought, the rise of medicine and the decline of superstitions. It will have caused an immeasurable number of victims. Only in the nineteenth century, the abuses of ecclesiastical authority will be recognized by the Church.

The witches: Who are they?

a. The characteristics given to witches

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, among the Franks and the Visigoths, certain crimes, associated with beings named witches, were punished by fines or public humiliations. There are

acts such as: eating men, making a woman sterile, casting spells on another woman, causing plants to perish, disturbing spirits, causing hail, making nocturnal sacrifices.

During the witch hunt, characteristics are defined in order to be able to recognize and denounce them. First of all, the witch is usually a woman, because she is a weak being, more puny than man, intellectually limited, and therefore more easily tormented and manipulated by the Devil. Women are thus more susceptible to heresies. She is described with long, black hair, discreet clothes to go unnoticed, rather dark colors, with black, green or purple hues. Often a widow, she is all the more associated with the color black. She is endowed with a singular beauty, is young and seductive, or can change her physical appearance to appear attractive in the eyes of men, in order to be able to manipulate them and divert them from the right path. Another representation appears little by little, that of an elderly woman, stooped and ugly, consequence of the harmful effects of her black magic. She is granted the ability to metamorphose into wild animals (hare, nocturnal birds). She changes her appearance at night to enter houses and poison new-borns. They are women living in retreat, in the countryside, mountains or forests, and associated with the night, during which they attack the villagers. They are associated with the desire for revenge. Indeed, they are associated with the elements that seemed terrifying for the time, such as darkness and the insecurity that it provides, and wild beasts, which are then popular fears. The witch is interested in the occult sciences, such as astrology, spiritualism, magic, witchcraft, alchemy, and she practices pagan rites. We associate her with the broom, because she used to sweep the ritual area beforehand in order to materially and then spiritually purify the place. It is designated capable of flying on a stick or an animal, thanks to the wind it causes, or by transforming into a bird (magpie, owl). They smear their bodies with ointments, which allows them to be lifted into the air and to be able to almost instantly go to the places of sabbat. She can wear horns on her head or crescent moon headdresses, as a sign of power, such as the lunar goddesses. Some are healers and master the knowledge of plants, minerals, and their therapeutic properties. However, they are thus associated with poisoners. Indeed, they use plants that can be toxic depending on the dose provided, or even, these plants can cause a hallucinatory, narcotic, addictive, or confusing state. These phenomena were not yet measured at the time. It was said then that they were preparing their ointments in order to obtain these deadly or hallucinogenic effects. Witches are equated with a demonic creature, and therefore are linked to epidemics such as the black death, famines, and meteorological upheavals. Their goal is to harm others. His actions are malicious. They are treacherous women. They practice the Sabbath, organizing banquets and night meetings during which they smear themselves with ointments and make a pact with the devil.

During their trial, we recognize them by checking certain characteristics that we attributed to witches: It was conceived that their body was lighter than water, because assimilated to the volatile flames of Hell because of their connection with the Devil. The accused were then subjected to the ordeal of bathing, they were thrown bound feet and fists into a well or a stream to check if she was floating. Likewise, they were subjected to the test of fire, that is to say that she had to walk on embers or red-hot iron. It was recognized that they should in no way feel the painful effects caused by burns. Finally, the presence of the demon's mark was checked, which could be a large mole, a wart, a dart, or a birthmark.

Writings have made it possible to transmit certain criteria for recognizing witches. We can note two great treatises on demonology: the *Formicarius* and the *Malleus Maleficum*. The *Formicarius* completed around 1435 by Johannes Nider describes the witch, regularly in a state of trance, participating in orgiastic parties, stealing at night, recalling that she made a pact with the Devil. He declares her a devourer of children, and describes her secret meetings. The treatise against witchcraft, the *Malleus Maleficum*, literally "The Witches' Hammer", was published in 1486 by Heinrich Krämer and Jacob Sprenger⁶¹. It is inspired by the work previously presented. It forms an instruction manual for recognizing witches. It is stipulated that witchcraft is practiced by women, because of their weakness, who used their beauty to bewitch men. This treatise also links the witch to depravity and an environment of lust, nudity, and attributes to her the ability to fly on a broom.

Some famous witches

Results. In Europe, one of the first convictions for witchcraft related in written evidence takes place in 1324 in Kilkenny in Ireland. Alice Kyteler marries a wealthy landlord. This one ages hastily and dies. Now, he is her fourth deceased husband. Her own children suspect her of bewitchment and self-interested poisoning. During his trial, one of his maids, Petronilla of Meath, was questioned and admitted the facts. She also admitted that Alice Kyteler had taught her witchcraft and that they flew at night together on brooms. The servant was burned alive, on the contrary Alice Kyteler managed to escape before her conviction.

The trial of Zugarramurdi took place in Spain, in 1610. A man denounces Maria de Zimilguen, who allegedly incited him to make a pact with the Devil. An investigation then begins following the usual stages of torture and interrogation to certify her identity as a witch. The woman ends up confessing her acts of witchcraft, her pact with Satan, and denounces forty other witches and wizards. Most of them were executed in front of more than 20,000 people.

The most famous witchcraft trial took place in 1692, in a British colony settled in Salem in Massachusetts, in North America. It concerned two cousins, daughters and nieces of a Christian pastor, Elizabeth Parris and Abigail Williams, aged 9 and 11 respectively. They were discovered to have strange behavior, hysterical disorders, they began to speak an unknown language and were seized with convulsions. The doctor did not determine any physical cause, so these facts were interpreted as the possession of the Devil, and the girls were convicted of witchcraft. Other little girls around developed similar symptoms. These children were called the Salem Witches.

The witches present in other cultures

In the culture of South Africa, diurnal and benevolent witches are differentiated from nocturnal, malevolent and solitary witches. Some peoples have beliefs close to Western myths, because they admit that witches fly on brooms at night, that they are cannibals, and that they dance naked. Also, they perceive them as women who capture the spirits of the deceased to make them their slaves. The Lovedu tribe believes that the powers are transmitted by the mother, through breast milk and a filial learning of the use of the acquired powers. She does not recognize the witch as a cruel being, but as a mischievous and mocking person. Nigerien peoples give the witch the power to transform into birds.

Conclusion. The witch is portrayed as an unpleasant character. She is perceived by the other characters as being appalling, scary and appalling. She is mocking and contemptuous, has a laugh “so loud and so ugly” or “had sneered wickedly”. We always associate her with meanness and she does not trust her, she is suspicious of others. For example, Baba Yaga does not let anyone approach her house, and the witch of Jorinde and Joringel uses a spell of immobility to prevent strangers from approaching her castle from less than a hundred paces. She refuses maternal love (asks for Vassilissa’s immediate departure, who evokes it), and maybe even love in general. Indeed, she opposes Rapunzel’s love for her prince, or she makes it difficult to express the little mermaid’s love feelings to her prince. The witch is portrayed as being a cruel character, who deprives of freedom or kills children, who tears the eyes of a man in love, who cuts the tongue of an undine with a wonderful voice, or even it is the side effects of her spells that are cruel: they can turn into foam and therefore lead to death, and they cause great suffering “as if she had stepped on sharpened needles and knives”.

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