**Witches and Warlocks**

*In this section I have included mostly material about witchcraft, rather than the spells themselves. However on the page where you downloaded this you can find a rand of links to various curses and spells to see what they were like.*

*Magic tends to something that is attributed to other people, and people you don’t like – what you do is usually seen as religion or something positive. The Romans attributed the arrival of magic into Rome to the influence of the East, where it was created. In the following Pliny the Elder[[1]](#footnote-1) gives one account of how magic came to be and then moved on to a range of magical and medical remedies, pretty much all which sound horrific. Notice how blurred the line is between something as simple as skin care and magic – it was hard in antiquity to draw any firm lines about what defined maagic.*

**I**. In the previous part of my work I have often indeed refuted the fraudulent lies of the Magi, whenever the subject and the occasion required it, and I shall continue to expose them. In a few areas, however, the theme deserves to be enlarged upon, if only because the most lying of arts has held complete sway throughout the world for many ages. Nobody should be surprised at the greatness of its influence, since alone of the arts it has embraced three others that hold supreme dominion over the human mind, and made them subject to itself alone. Nobody will doubt that it first arose from medicine, and that professing to promote health it insidiously advanced under the disguise of a higher and holier system; that to the most seductive and welcome promises it added the powers of religion, about which even today the human race is quite in the dark; that again meeting with success it made a further addition of astrology, because there is nobody who is not eager to learn his destiny, or who does not believe that the truest account of it is that gained by watching the skies. Accordingly, holding men's emotions in a threefold bond, magic rose to such a height that even today it has sway over a great part of mankind, and in the East commands the Kings of Kings.

**II**. Without doubt magic arose in Persia with Zoroaster. On this our authorities are agreed, but whether he was the only one of that name, or whether there was also another afterwards, is not clear. Eudoxus, who wished magic to be acknowledged as the noblest and most useful of the schools of philosophy, declared that this Zoroaster lived six thousand years before Plato's death, and Aristotle agrees with him. Hermippus, a most studious writer about every aspect of magic, and an exponent of two million verses composed by Zoroaster, added summaries too to his rolls, and gave Agonaces as the teacher by whom he said that he had been instructed, assigning to the man himself a date five thousand years before the Trojan War. What especially is surprising is the survival, through so long a period, of the craft and its tradition; treatises are wanting, and besides there is no line of distinguished or continuous successors to keep alive their memory. For how few know anything, even by hearsay, of those who alone have left their names but without other memorial—Apusorus and Zaratus of Media, Marmarus and Arabantiphocus of Babylon, or Tarmoendas of Assyria? The most surprising thing, however, is the complete silence of Homer about magic in his poem on the Trojan War [*Iliad]*, and yet so much of his work in the wanderings of Ulysses is so occupied with it that it alone forms the backbone of the whole work, if indeed they put a magical interpretation upon the Proteus episode in Homer and the songs of the Sirens, and especially upon the episode of Circe and of the calling up of the dead from Hades, of which magic is the sole theme. And in later times nobody has explained how ever it reached Telmesus,[[2]](#footnote-2) a city given up to superstition, or when it passed over to the Thessalian matrons, whose surname a was long proverbial in our part of the world, although magic was a craft repugnant to the Thessalian people, who were content, at any rate in the Trojan period, with the medicines of Chiron, and with the War God as the only wielder of the thunderbolt? I am indeed surprised that the people over whom Achilles once ruled had a reputation for magic so lasting that Menander, a man with an unrivalled gift for sound literary taste, gave the name *Thessala[[3]](#footnote-3)* to his comedy, which deals fully with the tricks of the women for calling down the moon. I would believe that Orpheus was the first to carry the craft to his near neighbours, and that his superstition grew from medicine, if the whole of Thrace, the home of Orpheus, had not been untainted by magic. The first man, so far as I can discover, to write a still-extant treatise on magic was Osthanes, who accompanied the Persian King Xerxes in his invasion of Greece, and sowed what I may call the seeds of this monstrous craft, infecting the whole world by the way at every stage of their travels. A little before Osthanes, the more careful inquirers place another Zoroaster, a native of Proconnesus. One thing is certain; it was this Osthanes who chiefly roused among the Greek peoples not so much an eager appetite for his science as a sheer mania. And yet I notice that of old, in fact almost always, the highest literary distinction and renown have been sought from that science. Certainly Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus and Plato went overseas to learn it, going into exile rather than on a journey, taught it openly on their return, and considered it one of their most treasured secrets. Democritus taught Apollobex the Copt and Dardanus the Phoenician, entering the latter's tomb to obtain his works and basing his own on their doctrines. That these were accepted by any human beings and transmitted by memory is the most extraordinary phenomenon in history; so utterly are they lacking in credibility and decency that those who like the other works of Democritus deny that the magical books are his. But it is all to no purpose, for it is certain that Democritus especially instilled into men's minds the sweets of magic. Another extraordinary thing is that both these arts, medicine I mean and magic, flourished together, Democritus expounding magic in the same age as Hippocrates expounded medicine, about the time of the Peloponnesian War, which was waged in Greece from the three-hundredth year of our city. There is yet another branch of magic, derived from Moses, Jannes [an Egyptian magician], Lotapes [Iotape = Yahweh], and the Jews, but living many thousand years after Zoroaster. So much more recent is the branch in Cyprus. In the time too of Alexander the Great, no slight addition was made to the influence of the profession by a second Osthanes, who, honoured by his attendance on Alexander, travelled certainly without the slightest doubt all over the world.

**III**. Among Italian tribes also there still certainly exist traces of magic in the Twelve Tables, as is proved by my own and the other evidence set forth in an earlier Book? It was not until the 657th year of the City [97 BCE] that in the consulship of Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus and Publius Licinius Crassus there was passed a resolution of the Senate forbidding human sacrifice; so that down to that date it is manifest that such abominable rites were practised.

**IV**. Magic certainly found a home in the two Gallic provinces, and that down to living memory. For the principate of Tiberius Caesar did away with their Druids and this tribe of seers and medicine men. But why should I speak of these things when the craft has even crossed the Ocean and reached the empty voids of Nature? Even today Britain practises magic in awe, with such grand ritual that it might seem that she gave it to the Persians. So universal is the cult of magic throughout the world. although its nations disagree or are unknown to each other. It is beyond calculation how great is the debt owed to the Romans, who swept away the mon­strous rites, in which to kill a man was the highest religious duty and for him to be eaten a passport to health.

**V**. As Osthanes said, there are several forms of magic; he professes to divine from water, globes, air, stars, lamps, basins and axes, and by many other methods, and besides to converse with ghosts and those in the underworld. All of these in our generation the Emperor Nero discovered to be lies and frauds. In fact his passion for the lyre and tragic song was no greater than his passion for magic; his elevation to the greatest height of human fortune aroused desire in the vicious depths of his mind; his greatest wish was to give commands to the gods, and he could rise to no nobler ambition. No other of the arts ever had a more enthusiastic patron. Every means were his to gratify his desire—wealth, strength, aptitude for learning—and what else did the world not allow! That the craft is a fraud there could be no greater or more indisputable proof than that Nero abandoned it; but would that he had consulted about his suspicions the powers of Hell and any other gods whatsoever, instead of entrusting these researches to pimps and harlots. Of a surety no ceremony, outlandish and savage though the rites may be, would not have been gentler than Nero's thoughts; behaving more cruelly than anyone else, Nero filled our Rome with ghosts.

**VI**. The Magi have certain means of evasion; for example that the gods neither obey those with freckles nor are seen by them. Was this perhaps their objection to Nero? But his body was without blemish; he was free to choose the fixed days, could easily obtain perfectly black sheep, and as for human sacrifice, he took the greatest delight in it. Mithridates the Magus had come to him bringing a retinue for the Annenian triumph over himself, thereby laying a heavy burden on the provinces. He had refused to travel by sea, for the Magi hold it sin to spit into the sea or wrong that element by other necessary functions of mortal creatures. He had brought Magi with him, had initiated Nero into their banquets; yet the man giving him a kingdom was unable to acquire from him the magic art. Therefore let us be convinced by this that magic is detestable, vain, and idle; and though it has what I might call shadows of truth, their power comes from the art of the poisoner, not of the Magi. One might well ask what were the lies of the old Magi, when as a youth I saw Apion the grammarian, who told me that the herb cynocephalia, called in Egypt *osiritis*, was an instrument of divina­tion and a protection from all kinds of sorcery, but if it were uprooted altogether the digger would die at once, and that he had called up ghosts to inquire from Homer his native country and the name of his parents, but did not dare to repeat the answers which he said were given.

**VII**. It should be unique evidence of fraud that they look upon the mole of all living creatures with the greatest awe, although it is cursed by Nature with so many defects, being permanently blind, sunk in other darkness also, and resembling the buried dead. In no entrails is placed such faith; to no creature do they attribute more supernatural properties; so that if anyone eats its heart, fresh and still beating, they promise powers of divination and of foretelling the issue of matters in hand. They declare that a tooth, extracted from a living mole and attached as an amulet, cures toothache. The rest of their beliefs about this animal I will relate in the appropriate places. But of all they say nothing will be found more likely than that the mole is an antidote for the bite of the shrewmouse, seeing that an antidote for it, as I have said, is even earth that has been depressed by cart wheels.

**VIII**. Toothache is also cured, the Magi tell us, by the ash of the burnt heads without any flesh of dogs that have died of madness, which must be dropped in cyprus oil through the ear on the side where the pain is; also by the left eye-tooth of a dog, the aching tooth being scraped round with it; by one of the vertebrae of the draco or of the enhydris, the serpent being a white male. With this eye-tooth they serape all round the painful one, or they make an amulet of two upper teeth, when the pain is in the upper jaw, using lower teeth for the lower jaw. With its fat they rub hunters of the crocodile. They also scrape teeth with bones extracted from the forehead of a lizard at a full moon, without their touching the earth. They rinse the mouth with a decoction of dogs' teeth in wine, boiled down to one-half. The ash of these teeth with honey helps children who are slow in teething. A dentifrice also is made with the same ingredients. Hollow teeth are stuffed with the ash of mouse dung or with dried lizards' liver. A snake's heart, eaten or worn as an amulet, is considered efficacious. There are among them some who recommend a mouse to be chewed up twice a month to prevent aches. Earthworms, boiled down in oil and poured into the ear on the side where there is pain, afford relief. These also, reduced to ash and plugged into decayed teeth, force them to fall out easily, and applied to sound teeth relieve any pain in them. They should be burnt, however, in an earthen pot. They also benefit if boiled down in squill vinegar with the root of a mulberry tree, so as to make a wash for the teeth. The maggot also, which is found on the plant called Venus' Bath, plugged into hollow teeth, is wonderfully good. But they fall out at the touch of the cabbage caterpillar, and the bugs from the mallow are poured into the ears with rose oil. The little grains of sand, that are found in the horns of snails, if put into hollow teeth, free them at once from pain. Empty snail shells, reduced to ash and myrrh added, are good for the gums, as is the ash of a serpent burnt with salt in an earthen pot, poured with rose oil into the opposite ear, or the slough of a snake with oil and pitch-pine resin warmed and poured into either ear—some add frankincense and rose oil—and if put into hollow teeth it also makes them fall out without trouble. I think it idle talk that white snakes cast their slough about the rising of the Dog-star, since the casting has been seen in Italy before the rising, and in warm regions it is much less probable for sloughing to be so late. But they say that this slough, even when dry, combined with wax forces out teeth very quickly. A snake's tooth also, worn as an amulet, relieves toothache. There are some who think that a spider also is beneficial, the animal itself, caught with the left hand, beaten up in rose oil, and poured into the ear on the side of the pain. The little bones of hens have been kept hanging on the wall of a room with the gullet intact; if a tooth is touched, or the gum scraped, and the bone thrown away, they assure us that the pain at once disappears, as it does if a raven's dung, wrapped in wool, is worn as an amulet, or if sparrows' dung is warmed with oil and poured into the ear nearer the pain. This however causes unbearable itching, and so it is better to rub the part with vinegar and the ash of a sparrow's nestlings burnt on twigs.

**IX**. They assert that the taste in the mouth is made agreeable if the teeth are rubbed with the ash of burnt mice mixed with honey; some add fennel root. If the teeth are picked with a vulture's feather, they make the breath sour. To pick them with a porcupine's quill helps their firmness. Sores on the tongue or lips are healed by a decoction of swallows in honey wine; chaps on them by goose grease or hen's grease, by oesypum[[4]](#footnote-4) with gall nut, by white webs of spiders, or by the small webs spun on rafters. If the mouth has been scalded by over-hot things, bitch's milk will give an immediate cure.

**X**. Spots on the face are removed by oesypum with Gorsican honey, which is considered the most acrid; scurf on the skin of the face by the same with rose oil on a piece of fleece; some add also butter. If however there is psoriasis, dog's gall is applied to the spots, which are first pricked with a needle; to livid spots and bruises rams' or sheep's lungs are applied hot and cut into thin slices, or else pigeon's dung. The skin of the face is preserved by goose grease or hen's. To lichen is also applied mouse dung in vinegar, or ash of the hedgehog in oil; for this treatment they prescribe that the face should first be fomented with soda and vinegar. Facial troubles are also removed by the ash with honey of the broad but small snails that are found everywhere. The ash indeed of all snails, such is its detergent property, thickens and warms; for that reason it is an ingredient of caustic preparations and used as a liniment for itch, leprous sores, and freckles. I find also that there are ants called Herculanean, which beaten up and with the addition of a little salt cure facial troubles. The buprestis is a creature rarely found in Italy, and very similar to a long-legged beetle. Oxen at pasture are very apt not to see it—hence too its name—and should it be swallowed it causes such inflammation on reaching the gall that it bursts the animal. This insect applied with he-goat suet removes lichen from the face by its corrosive property, as I have already said. Vulture's blood, beaten up with cedar resin and the root of the white chamaeleon, a plant I have already mentioned, and covered with a cabbage leaf, heals leprous sores, as do the legs of locusts beaten up with he-goat suet. Pimples are cured by poultry fat kneaded with onion. Very useful too for the face is honey in which bees have died, but the best thing for clearing the complexion and removing wrinkles is swan's fat. Branded marks are removed by pigeon's dung in vinegar.

**XI**. I find that a heavy cold clears up if the sufferer kisses a mule's muzzle. Pain in the uvula and in the throat is relieved by the dung, dried in shade, of lambs that have not yet eaten grass, uvula pain by applying the juice of a snail transfixed by a needle, so that the snail itself may be hung up in the smoke, and by the ash of swallows with honey. This also gives relief to affections of the tonsils. Gargling with ewe's milk is a help to tonsils and throat, as is a multipede beaten up, gargling with pigeon's dung and raisin wine, and also an external application of it with dried fig and soda. Sore throat and a running cold are relieved by snails—they should be boiled unwashed and with only the earth taken off crushed and given to drink in raisin wine; some hold that the snails of Astypalaea are the most efficacious—by their ash, and also by rubbing with a cricket or if anybody touches the tonsils with hands that have crushed a cricket.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* Book 30.1-11

*Our only complete Roman novel, The Golden Ass, is packed with witches. The narrator, Lucius, is a wealthy college student travelling to Thessaly in search of magic and witches. After introducing himself, he narrates how he overheard a story about witchcraft. Notice in this who the witches are and how they overturn what the Romans would think of as acceptable hierarchies about gender and sexuality:*

I caught up with two fellow travellers who happened to have gone on a short way ahead. As I began to eavesdrop, one was roaring with laughter and saying: ‘Stop lying like that - I’ve never heard anything so totally ridiculous.’ At that I, thirsting as always for novelty, struck in: ‘No, please,’ I said, ‘let me in on this - not that I’m nosy, it’s just that I’m the sort of person who likes to know everything, or at least as much as I can. And an agreeable and amusing story or two will lessen the steepness of this hill we’re climbing.’ ‘Yes,’ said the first speaker, ‘these lies are just as true as it would be to say that because of magic rivers can suddenly reverse their flow, the sea be becalmed, the winds cease to blow, the sun stand still, the moon be milked of her dew, the stars uprooted, the daylight banished, the night prolonged.’ Then I, emboldened, said: ‘You, sir, who began this story, please don’t be annoyed or too disgusted to tell us the rest’; and to the other man, ‘But what you are stupidly refusing to listen to and stubbornly making fun may very well be a true story. Really, I think you are being ignorant and perverse when you account as a lie anything you’ve never heard of or aren’t familiar with the sight of or just find too difficult for your understanding to grasp. If you look into these things a little more closely, you’ll find out that they aren’t only reliably attested but can easily happen. Look at me, yesterday evening: trying desperately to keep my end up at dinner, I rashly tried to cram down a piece of cheesecake that was too big, and the gooey stuff lodged in my throat and blocked my windpipe -I was very nearly a goner. Then again, when I was in Athens only the other day, in front of the Painted Stoa,[[5]](#footnote-5) I saw with these two eyes a juggler swallow a sharp cavalry sabre, point first; and then the same man, encouraged by a small donation, lowered a hunting spear right down into his inside, lethal point first. And then, lo and behold, above the blade of the lance, where the shaft of the inverted weapon entered the man’s throat and stood up over his head, there appeared a boy, pretty as a girl, who proceeded to wreathe himself round it in a bonelessly sensuous dance. We were all lost in amazement; you’d have thought it was Aesculapius’ own rough-hewn staff, with his sacred serpent twining sinuously round it. But sir, please do go on with your story. I promise you I’ll believe it even if our friend here won’t, and at the first inn we come to I’ll stand you lunch - there’s your payment secured.’ ‘Very kind of you,’ he said, ‘but I’ll start my story again in any case,

thanks all the same.

First however let me swear to you by this all-seeing divine Sun that what I’m going to tell you really happened; and if you get to the next town in Thessaly, you’ll be left in no doubt; all this was done in public and everyone there is still talking about it. But to let you know who I am, and where I come from: my name is Aristomenes, from Aegium. Let me tell you how I get a living: I travel all over Thessaly and Aetolia and Boeotia in honey and cheese and suchlike innkeeper’s staples. So, hearing that at Hypata - it’s the most important place in Thessaly - there was some new and particularly tasty cheese on offer at a very reasonable price, I hurried off there to put in a bid for the lot. But as tends to happen, I got off on the wrong foot and was disappointed in my hope of making a killing: a wholesaler called Lupus had bought it all the day before. So, worn out by my useless hurry, I went at sunset to the public baths; and who should I see there but my old friend Socrates. He was sitting on the ground, half wrapped in a tattered old coat, his face sickly yellow so that I hardly recognized him, miserably thin, looking just like one of those bits of Fortune’s flotsam one sees begging in the streets. Seeing him looking like this, though as I say I knew him extremely well, it was with some hesitation that I went up to him. “Socrates, my good friend,” I said, “what’s up? Why are you looking like this? What have they done to you? Back home you’ve been mourned and given up for dead, and your children have been given guardians by the court. Your wife has given you a funeral, and now, disfigured by months of grieving and having wept herself nearly blind, she’s being urged by her parents to cheer up the family misfortunes by getting happily married again.[[6]](#footnote-6) And here are you, looking like a ghost and putting us all to shame.” ‘“Aristomenes,” he said, “you just don’t understand the deceitful twists and turns of Fortune, her surprise attacks, her reversals of direction,” and as he spoke he covered his face, which had become red with shame, with his rags and patches, leaving himself naked from navel to groin. I couldn’t bear the pitiful sight of his distress, and tried to pull him to his feet. But he, keeping his head covered, cried: “Leave me alone, leave me, and let Fortune go on enjoying the spectacle of this trophy that she’s set up.” However, I got him to come with me, and taking off one of my tunics I dressed or at least covered him up with it, and took him off to the baths. I got him oil and towels and with much effort scrubbed off the horrible filth he was encrusted with; and then when he had been thoroughly put to rights (by which time I was worn out myself and was hard put to it to hold him up), I took him back to my inn, put him to bed to recover, gave him a good dinner and a relaxing glass or two of wine, and chatted to him to calm him down. ‘He was just beginning to talk freely, to crack the odd joke, even to get mildly flippant and answer back, when suddenly, heaving an excruciating sigh from the depths of his chest and passionately slapping his forehead, he broke out: “Gods, what miserable luck! It was only because I went in search of a bit of pleasure, to see a gladiatorial show I’d heard a lot about, that I got into this dreadful mess. As you know, I’d gone to Macedonia on business. I’d been hard at it there for nine months, and having made a decent profit I was on my way home. Not far from Larissa, where I was planning to see the show on my way through, I was waylaid in a wild and watery glen by a gang of bandits - absolute monsters - and robbed of everything I had, though in the end I escaped with my life. Reduced to this desperate state, I took shelter at an inn kept by a woman called Meroe, not at all bad-looking for her age. I told her everything, why I’d been away so long, my anxiety to get home, and the lamentable story of the robbery. She welcomed me more than kindly, treating me first to a good dinner, free gratis and for nothing, and then to a share of her bed - she really was on heat. And that’s how I came to grief: that first night with her was the start of a long and degrading association. Even the rags which the robbers had generously left me to cover myself with, even those I made over to her, along with the pittance I earned as a porter while I was still fit enough for the work. And that’s how this worthy wife, so called, and the malevolence of Fortune between them have reduced me to what you saw just now.” ‘“Well, damn it,” I said, “you deserve anything you get and worse than that, for preferring the pleasure of fornicating with a leathery old hag to your home and children.” But he put his finger to his lips and looked utterly horrified. “Shh, quiet,” he said, looking round to see that we weren’t overheard. “Don’t talk like that about a woman with superhuman powers, or your rash tongue will get you into trouble.” “Really?” I said. “What sort of woman is this mighty bar-queen?” “A witch,” he answered, “with supernatural powers; she can bring down the sky, raise up the earth, solidify springs, dissolve mountains, raise the dead, send the gods down below, blot out the stars, and illuminate Hell itself.” “Come on,” I said, “spare me the histrionics and let’s have it in plain language.” “Well,” he said, “do you want to hear one or two of her exploits? There are lots I could tell you about. It’s not only our own people that she can make fall madly in love with her, but the Indians, the Ethiopians - both lots - even the Antipodeans; that’s nothing, the merest ABC of her art. But let me tell you what she did in full view of a crowd of eyewitnesses.

9 ‘“When one of her lovers was unfaithful to her, with a single word she turned him into a beaver, because when they’re afraid of being caught beavers escape their pursuers by biting off their balls[[7]](#footnote-7) - the idea being that something like that would happen to him. An innkeeper, who was a neighbour and therefore a trade rival, she changed into a frog; and now the poor old chap swims around in a barrel of his own wine and greets his old customers with a polite croak as he squats there in the lees. Another time she changed a lawyer who appeared against her in court into a ram, and it’s as a ram that he now pleads his cases. Again, the wife of another of her lovers she condemned to perpetual pregnancy for being witty at her expense; she shut up the woman’s womb and halted the growth of the foetus, so that it’s now eight years (we’ve all done the sum) that this unfortunate creature has been swollen with her burden, as if it was an elephant that she was going to produce. 10 ‘“This sort of thing kept happening, and a lot of people suffered at her hands, so that public indignation grew and spread; and a meeting was held at which it was decided that on the following day she should receive drastic punishment by stoning to death. However, she thwarted this move by the strength of her spells - just like the famous Medea when, having obtained a single day’s grace from Creon, she used it to burn up the old king’s palace, his daughter, and himself, with the crown of fire. Just so Meroe sacrificed into a trench to the powers of darkness (she told me all this the other day when she was drunk), and shut up the whole population in their houses by silent supernatural force. For two whole days they couldn’t undo their bolts or get their doors open or even break through their walls, until in the end they came to an agreement among themselves and all called out, swearing by what they held most sacred, that they would not lay a finger on her and that if anybody had other ideas they would come to her assistance. So she was appeased and let them all off, except for the man who had convened the public meeting. Him she whisked off at dead of night, with his whole house - walls, foundations, the ground it stood on - still shut up, a hundred miles away to another town which was situated on the top of a rocky and waterless mountain. And since the houses there were too closely packed to allow room for another one, she simply dumped it outside the town gates and decamped.”

11 ‘“My dear Socrates,” I said, “what you tell me is as ghastly as it’s astonishing. You really have made me very uneasy - no, you’ve terrified me. It’s not just a pinprick of anxiety but a positive spearthrust that you’ve inflicted - the fear that the old woman may invoke some supernatural aid as she’s done before to eavesdrop on this conversation. So let’s get to bed straight away, and when we’ve slept off our fatigue let’s get as far as possible away from here before it’s light.” Before I had finished offering this advice, my friend, who had been tried to the limit by so many wearing experiences and more wine than he was used to, was fast asleep and snoring noisily. So I closed the door and shot the bolts firmly, and also wedged my bed hard up against the hinges and lay down on it. At first my fear kept me awake for a time, but then about midnight I dropped off. Hardly had I done so when suddenly (you wouldn’t think a whole gang of robbers could manage such an onslaught) the door was thrown open, or rather broken down and torn right off its hinges and sent crashing to the ground. My bed, which was only a cot, with a foot missing and riddled with worm, was overturned by this violent shock, and I was hurled out of it and rolled on to the floor with the bed upside down on top of me and hiding me. 12 ‘Then I discovered that some emotions naturally express themselves by their opposites. Just as one very often weeps tears of joy, so then, utterly terrified as I was, I couldn’t help laughing at the idea of myself as a tortoise. Grovelling there in the dirt I was able from under the protection of my resourceful bed to get a sideways view of what was happening. I saw two elderly women, one carrying a lighted lamp, the other a sponge and a naked sword. So arrayed, they stood on either side of Socrates, who was still sound asleep. The one with the sword spoke first: “There he is, sister Panthia, my beloved Endymion, my Ganymede, who by night and day has played fast and loose with my tender youth, who scorns my love, and not content with calumniating me is trying to escape me. I take it I’m supposed to play abandoned Calypso to his wily Ulysses, left to mourn in perpetual solitude?” And then she pointed and indicated me to Panthia: “But here we have our friend Aristomenes the Counsellor, who is the author of this escape plan and now lies on the ground under that bed within a hair’s-breadth of death, watching all this and thinking that the injuries he has done me will go unpunished. One day - what am I saying, now, this very moment - I’ll make him sorry for his past impudence and his present curiosity.”

13 ‘Hearing this I was in agony, drenched in an icy sweat and shaking all over, so that the bed too was convulsed by my shudders and heaved up and down on top of me. Then said the amiable Panthia: “Now, sister, shall we take this one first and tear him limb from limb like Maenads, or tie him down and castrate him?” But Meroe - for she it was, as I realized from what Socrates had told me - said: “No, let him survive to give a modest burial to the body of his poor friend,” and twisting Socrates’ head to one side she buried her sword up to the hilt in the left-hand side of his throat, catching the blood that spurted out in a leather bottle so neatly that not a drop was spilled. This I saw with my own eyes. Next dear Meroe, wanting I suppose to keep as closely as possible to the sacrificial forms, plunged her hand into the wound right down to his entrails, rummaged about, and pulled out my poor friend’s heart. At this he let out through the wound in his throat, which the violent stroke of the sword had totally severed, an inarticulate whistling sound, and gave up the ghost. Then Panthia, blocking the gaping wound with her sponge said, “Now, sponge,” she said, “you were born in the sea - take care not to cross a river.” With these words they left, but first they pulled the bed off me and squatted down and emptied their bladders over my face, leaving me soaked in their filthy piss. The moment they had gone the door reverted to normal: the hinges flew back into position, the bars returned to the doorposts, and the bolts shot back into the slot. As for me, I remained where I was, grovelling on the floor, fainting, naked, cold and drenched in piss, just like a new-born baby - or rather half dead, a posthumous survivor of myself, an absolutely certain candidate for crucifixion. “What’s going to happen to me,” I said to myself, “when he’s found in the morning with his throat cut? I can tell the truth, but who’ll believe me? I can hear them now. ‘Couldn’t you at least have called for help if you couldn’t cope with a woman - a big chap like you? A man murdered before your eyes, and not a peep out of you? And how is it that you weren’t likewise made away with by these female bandits? Why should their cruelty have spared a witness who could inform against them? So, you escaped Death; now go back to him!”’ ‘While I was going over this in my mind again and again, the night wore on. The best plan then seemed to be to get clear surreptitiously before dawn and to take the road, though I had no very clear idea where to go. So I shouldered my luggage and tried to undo the bolts; but the upright and conscientious door, which earlier had unbarred itself so readily, now only opened with great difficulty and after many turnings of the key. Then, “Hey, porter,” I called, “where are you? Open the front door. I want to be off early.” The porter was lying on the ground behind the door and was still half asleep. “Have some sense,” he said. “Don’t you know the roads are stiff with robbers, and you want to start out at this time of night? You may have some crime on your conscience that makes you eager to die, but I’m not such a fathead as to want to take your place.” “It’s nearly light,” I said, “and anyway, what can robbers take away from a traveller who’s got nothing? Don’t be stupid: you know that ten wrestlers can’t strip a naked man.” But he, drowsy and half asleep, turned over in bed and muttered: “Anyway, how do I know you haven’t murdered your companion that you came in with last night and aren’t trying to save yourself by doing a bunk?” ‘At that moment, I remember, I saw the earth opening and the depths of Hell, and Cerberus hungering for me; and I realized that it wasn’t in pity that dear old Meroe had spared my life, but in a spirit of sadism, saving me for the cross.

So I went back to my room to mull over the form my suicide was to take. Since the only lethal weapon provided by Fortune was my bed, “Now, now, O bed,” I cried, “my dearest bed, thou who hast endured with me so many sufferings, confidant and beholder of the night’s happenings, the only witness to my innocence that I can call against my accusers, do you provide me as I hasten to the shades with the weapon that shall save me.” With these words I set about undoing the cord with which it was strung and made one end of it fast to a beam which jutted out under the window; the other end I knotted firmly into a noose, and then climbing on the bed and mounting to my doom I put my head into the halter. But when I kicked the support away, so that the rope, tightened round my throat by my weight, should cut off the function of my breathing - at that moment the rotten old rope broke, and I fell from where I was standing on to Socrates, who lay nearby, and rolled with him on to the floor. 17 And precisely at that very same moment the porter burst abruptly in, shouting: “Where are you? You wanted to be off at dead of night, and now you’re back in bed and snoring!” At this, aroused either by my fall or the porter’s raucous bellowing, Socrates was on his feet first, remarking: “No wonder travellers hate all innkeepers! Look at this officious oaf, shoving in where he’s not wanted - to see what he can steal, I expect - and waking me up with his noise when I was fast asleep and still tired out.” ‘I then got up too, happily revived by this unexpected stroke of luck. “There, O most faithful of porters,” I said, “you see my companion and brother, the one that last night, when you were drunk, you accused me of murdering”; and as I spoke I embraced Socrates and kissed him. He was shocked by the smell of the foul fluid with which the witches had drenched me, and pushed me violently away, shouting “Get off me, you stink like the worst kind of urinal”, and then proceeded to ask me facetiously why I smelled like that. Embarrassed and on the spur of the moment I cracked some stupid joke to divert his attention to another subject. Then, slapping him on the back, I said: “Come on, let’s be off and enjoy an early start.” So, shouldering my traps, I paid the bill, and we set out.

18 ‘When we had gone some way the sun rose; and now that it was fully light, I looked very closely at my friend’s neck where I had seen the sword go in, and I said to myself: “You’re crazy; you were dead drunk and had a horrible dream. There’s Socrates whole, sound and unharmed. Where’s the wound? Where’s the sponge? And where’s the fresh deep scar?” Aloud I said: “The doctors are quite right when they tell us that eating and drinking too much causes nightmares. Look at me; I had a drop too much yesterday evening, and I passed a night of such dreadful threatening dreams that I still can’t believe I’m not spattered and defiled with human gore.” He smiled and said: “It’s not blood but piss you were drenched with. But to tell the truth, I too had a dream, that my throat was cut; I had a pain there, and I thought the heart was plucked out of me - and even now I feel faint, my knees are trembling and I can’t walk properly. I think I need something to eat to put the life back in me.” “Right,” I answered, “I’ve got some breakfast all ready for you,” and taking off my knapsack I quickly gave him some bread and cheese, adding, “let’s sit down under that plane tree.” ‘This we did, and I too had a little something. He was eating greedily, but as I watched him, I saw that his face was becoming drawn and waxy pale, and his strength seemed to be ebbing away. Indeed he was so altered by this deathly change of complexion that I panicked, thinking of those Furies of last night; and the first piece of bread I’d taken, not a very big one, lodged right in my throat and refused either to go down or to come back up. What increased my alarm was that there was almost nobody about. Who was going to believe that one of a pair of companions had been done in without foul play on the part of the other? Meanwhile Socrates, having made short work of the food, became desperately thirsty, as well he might, having wolfed down the best part of a first-rate cheese. Not far from the plane tree there flowed a gentle stream, its current so slow that it looked like a placid pool, all silver and glass. “There,” I said, “quench your thirst in that limpid spring.” He got up, and finding a place that sloped down to the water, he knelt and leaned over eagerly to drink. He had hardly touched the surface with his lips when the wound in his throat gaped wide open to the bottom and the sponge shot out, followed by a little blood. His lifeless body nearly pitched headlong into the water, but I managed to get hold of one foot and drag him laboriously up the bank. There, after mourning him as best I could in the circumstances, I covered my unfortunate friend with the sandy soil to rest there for ever by the river. Then, panic-stricken and in fear of my life, I made my escape through remote and pathless wildernesses; and like a man with murder on his conscience I left country and home to embrace voluntary exile. And now I have remarried and live in Aetolia.’

20 That was Aristomenes’ story. His companion, who from the start had remained stubbornly incredulous and would have no truck with what he told us, broke out: ‘Of all the fairytales that were ever invented, of all the lies that were ever told, that takes the biscuit’; and turning to me, ‘But you,’ he said, ‘to judge from your dress and appearance you’re an educated man - do you go along with this stuff?’ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘my opinion is that nothing is impossible and that we mortals get whatever the Fates have decided for us. You, I, everybody, we all meet with many amazing and unprecedented experiences, which aren’t believed when they’re told to somebody who lacks first-hand knowledge of them. But I do, I swear, believe our friend here, and I’m most grateful to him for amusing us with such a charming and delightful story. Here I’ve got to the end of this long and rugged road without effort and haven’t been bored. I believe my horse too thinks you’ve done him a favour, for without tiring him I see I’ve reached the city gates transported not on his back but, you might say, by my ears.’

Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 1.5-21

*The following is another story about witches from Apuleius’* Metamoprhoses, *where a young man tells the tale of how he had to watch a corpse one night to prevent witches stealing it. Notice how nothing is safe from witches, and how people even have to fear them in their homes on every occasion. The first speaker is Lucius, and the scene is a dinner party at a wealthy person’s house.*

‘Very true,’ I said; ‘and I don’t think I’ve ever felt freer anywhere than I have here. But I really dread the dark and inescapable haunts of the magic arts. They say that even the dead aren’t safe in their graves, but that their remains are gathered from tombs and funeral pyres, and pieces are snipped from corpses in order to destroy the living; and that at the very moment of the funeral preparations old hags of sorceresses will swoop down to snatch a body before its own people can bury it.’ To this another guest added: ‘Round here even the living aren’t spared. Somebody we know had a similar experience which left him mutilated and totally disfigured.’ At this the whole company burst into helpless laughter, and everybody’s eyes turned to a man sitting in the corner. He was put out by this unwelcome attention and muttering indignantly got up to go. ‘No, do stay for a bit, my dear Thelyphron,’ said Byrrhena, ‘and like the good fellow you are tell us your story again, so that my son Lucius here can enjoy your agreeable and amusing tale.’ ‘You, dear madam,’ he answered, ‘are always kind and considerate, but some people’s rudeness is intolerable.’ He was evidently upset, but when Byrrhena persisted and pressed him, unwilling though he was, to tell his story as a personal favour to her, he eventually did as she asked. 21 So having piled the coverlets into a heap and reclining half upright on one elbow, Thelyphron stretched out his right hand like a man making a formal speech, with the third and fourth fingers bent, the other two extended, and the thumb raised slightly as if in warning, and began. ‘I had not yet come of age when I left Miletus to see the Olympic games. Then I wanted to visit this part of your famous province, and so after touring all over Thessaly I came in an evil hour to Larissa. My money was running low, and I was looking round the town in search of some remedy for my poverty, when I saw in the public square a tall old man. He was standing on a stone and loudly announcing that if anybody was willing to watch a corpse, he would negotiate a price. “What’s this?” I asked a passer-by. “Are corpses here in the habit of running away?” “No, no,” he said. “A mere boy and a stranger like you obviously can’t be expected to realize that this is Thessaly you’re in, where witches regularly nibble pieces off the faces of the dead to get supplies for their magic art.” 22 ‘“But tell me, please,” I said, “about this business of watching over the dead.” “First of all,” he said, “you have to stay wide awake for the entire night; you mustn’t close your eyes for a second but must keep them firmly fixed on the body. You mustn’t let your attention wander or even steal a sidelong glance: these dreadful creatures, who can change themselves into anything, will take on the shape of any animal you like to name and creep up on you in stealth - it’s no trouble to them to outwit the eyes even of the Sun or Justice herself. They can take on the forms of birds or dogs or mice or even flies. Then they lull the watchers to sleep with their infernal enchantments. There’s no end to the tricks that these vile women contrive to work their wicked will. But the fee for this deadly job isn’t as a rule more than five or six gold pieces. Oh, I nearly forgot: if the body isn’t intact when it’s handed over in the morning, whatever’s been removed or mutilated has to be made good from the watcher’s own person.” 23 ‘Having taken this on board, I summoned up my courage and went up to the crier. “You can stop shouting,” I said. “Here’s a watcher all prepared. Name the price.” “You’ll get a thousand sesterces,” he said. “But look here, young fellow: this is the son of one of our chief citizens who’s died, and you must guard his body faithfully against the evil Harpies.” “Nonsense,” I said, “don’t give me that rubbish. You see before you a man of iron, who never sleeps, sharper-eyed than Lynceus or Argus, eyes all over him.” I had hardly finished speaking when he took me straight off. The house to which he brought me had its front door closed, and he ushered me in through a small back door, then into a shuttered room where he showed me in the gloom a weeping woman in deep mourning. Standing by her, “Here’s a man,” he said, “who has engaged himself to guard your husband and is confident he can do the job.” She parted the hair that hung down in front to reveal a face that was beautiful even in grief. Looking at me, she said: “Please, I beg you, do your duty with all possible alertness.” “You need not worry,” I said, “just so long as the fee is satisfactory.” 24 ‘Agreement reached, she rose and took me into another room. There was the body draped in snow-white linen, and when seven witnesses had been brought in she uncovered it herself. After weeping over it for some time she invoked the good faith of those present and proceeded to call off meticulously every feature of the body while one of the witnesses carefully wrote down a formal inventory. “Here you are,” she said. “Nose all there, eyes intact, ears entire, lips undamaged, chin in good shape. I ask you, fellow citizens, to note and attest this.” The tablets with the list were then sealed and she made to leave the room. But I said: “Please, madam, will you give orders for me to be supplied with everything I’ll need?” “What might that be?” she asked. “A large lamp,” I said, “and enough oil to last until dawn, and warm water with flagons of wine and a cup, and a plate of left-overs from dinner.” She shook her head. “You talk like a fool,” she said, “asking for suppers and left-overs in a house of mourning where there hasn’t even been a fire lit for days and days. Do you think you’re here to enjoy yourself? You would do better to remember where you are and look sad and tearful.” With these words she turned to a maid. “Myrrhine,” she said, “make haste and get a lamp and some oil, and then lock up the room and leave him to his watch.” 25 ‘Left alone with the corpse for company I rubbed my eyes to arm them for their watch, and began to sing to encourage myself. Dusk came, and darkness fell, and time wore on until it was the dead of night. My fear was at its height when there suddenly glided in a weasel which stood in front of me and fixed me with a piercing stare. I was alarmed at seeing this tiny animal so bold. “Get out,” I shouted, “you filthy beast, get back to your rat friends before I give you something to remember me by. Will you get out?” It turned and left the room, at which moment I was abruptly plunged into a bottomless abyss of sleep; the god of prophecy himself couldn’t have told which of the two of us lying there was deader, so lifeless was I. Indeed I needed somebody to mount guard over me, since I might just as well have been elsewhere. 26 ‘The crowing of the crested company was singing truce to darkness when I at last woke up. With my heart in my mouth I rushed over to the body with the lamp, uncovered its face and checked off all the features: they were all there. Now the poor weeping widow, in great anxiety, came bursting in with yesterday’s witnesses and fell on the body, covering it with kisses. Then after examining every detail by the light of the lamp she turned and called her steward Philodespotus. Having ordered him to pay over the fee immediately to their trusty watchman, which was done then and there, she added: “We are most grateful to you, young man; and what’s more, for this faithful service we shall from now on count you as a particular friend.” Delighted at this unexpected windfall and spellbound by the shining gold, which I was now jingling in my hand, “Madam,” I said, “count me rather as one of your servants, and whenever you need my services, don’t hesitate to command me.” The words were scarcely out of my mouth when the whole household, cursing the evil omen, fell on me with every weapon they could lay their hands on. One punched me on the jaw, another thumped me across the shoulders, and a third jabbed me viciously in the ribs; they kicked me, they pulled out my hair, they tore my clothes. So, bloodied and ripped apart like another Pentheus or Orpheus, I was thrown out of the house. 27 ‘While I was getting my breath back in the street outside, I belatedly realized how thoughtless and ill-omened my words had been, and admitted to myself that I had got off more lightly than I deserved. At this point I saw that the final lamentations and last goodbyes had been uttered, and the corpse had now left the house. As was traditional for a member of an aristocratic family, it was being given a public funeral. The procession was passing through the city square when there appeared an old man in black, weeping and tearing his handsome white hair. Seizing the bier with both hands he cried loudly, his voice choked by sobs: “Citizens! I charge you, as you are true men and loyal subjects, to avenge a murdered fellow citizen and punish this wicked woman as she deserves for her horrible crime. She, and no one else, to please her lover and get her hands on the estate, has poisoned this unfortunate young man, my sister’s son.” These tearful complaints the old man loudly directed now to this individual and now to that. The crowd began to turn ugly, the probability of the thing leading them to believe his accusation. They called for fire, and started picking up stones and egging on the street- urchins to kill her. She burst into tears (which were obviously rehearsed), and by all that she held sacred called on the gods to witness that she denied this awful crime. 28 ‘Then the old man said: “Suppose we leave the proof of the truth to divine Providence. We have here in Zatchlas of Egypt a prophet of the first rank. He has already agreed with me a large fee to bring back the soul of the deceased from the Underworld for a short while and restore his body to life.” So saying he led forward a young man dressed in a linen tunic and palm-leaf sandals with his head shaved bare. Repeatedly he kissed the man’s hands and touched his knees in supplication. “Have pity, O Priest,” he said, “have pity by the stars of heaven, by the infernal powers, by the natural elements, by the silences of night and the sanctuaries of Coptos, and by the risings of Nile and the secrets of Memphis and the sistrums of Pharos. Give him a brief enjoyment of the sun and let a little light into those eyes which are closed for ever. We do not seek to resist Fate or to deny Earth what is rightfully hers; we beg only for a short spell of life so that we may find consolation in vengeance.” The prophet, propitiated, laid some sort of herb on the corpse’s mouth and another on his breast. Then turning eastwards he silently invoked the majesty of the rising sun, arousing among the witnesses of this impressive performance excited expectations of a great miracle. 29 ‘I joined the crowd, and taking up a position on a tall stone just behind the bier I watched the whole scene curiously. The corpse’s chest began to fill, its pulse to beat, its breath to come; it sat up and the young man spoke. “Why, why,” he said, “have you called me back for these few moments to life and its obligations, when I have already drunk the water of Lethe and embarked on the marshes of the Styx? Leave me, I beg you, leave me to my rest.” To these words of the corpse the prophet returned a sharp answer: “Come now, tell the people everything and clear up the mystery of your death. Don’t you know that my incantations can call up Furies and that your weary body can still be tortured?” The man on the bier answered and with a deep groan addressed the people: “I died by the wicked arts of my new wife; doomed to drink her poisoned cup I surrendered my marriage bed to an adulterer before it had grown cold.” At this the exemplary widow put on a bold front and began to bandy words with her husband in a blasphemous attempt to rebut his accusations. The people were swayed this way and that, some calling for this abominable woman to be buried alive along with her husband’s body, others holding that the corpse was lying and should not be believed. 30 ‘However, the young man’s next words put an end to their doubts. With another deep groan he said: “I will give you the clearest proof that I speak nothing but the truth, and I will tell you something that nobody else could know or predict.” Then he pointed at me. “There is the man,” he said, “who guarded my body. He performed his duties with the utmost alertness, so that the hags who were waiting to plunder my corpse, though they changed themselves into all sorts of shapes to achieve their purpose, failed to outwit his vigilance. At last they wrapped a cloud of sleep round him, and while he was buried in deep oblivion they kept calling me by name, until my numbed limbs and chilled body made reluctant efforts to obey their magic summons. But at this point he heard his own name, which is the same as mine, and being in fact alive, though sleeping like the dead, got up without knowing what he was doing and like a lifeless ghost walked mechanically over to the door. Though it had been carefully bolted, there was a hole in it, and through that they cut off first his nose and then his ears; so he suffered the mutilation that was meant for me. Then, so as not to give the game away, they made shapes of his missing ears and nose in wax and fitted them exactly in place. And there he stands, poor devil, paid not for his work but for his disfigurement.” Horrified at what I had heard, I started to feel my face. I took hold of my nose, and it came off; I tried my ears, and so did they. Everybody was pointing at me, turning round to look at me, and there was a roar of laughter. Bathed in a cold sweat I slunk away through the crowd, and since then I’ve not been able to face returning home to be mocked, looking like this. So I’ve grown my hair long to hide my missing ears, and my shameful nose I keep decently covered with this linen pad.’

Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 2.20-30.

*An earlier Roman author than Apuleius, Horace, who wrote during the reign of Augustus imagined female witches killing well-born boys to make a love potion. The poem starts in the voice of the boy watching the witches setting up their spell, before moving to voice of one of the witches, and then back to the boys. Notice how disgustingly the witches are portrayed and how useless their magic is:*

“But oh, by all the gods in heaven, who rule the earth and human race, what means this horrible sound? And what the hideous looks of all these hags, fixed upon me alone? I conjure you by thy children (if invoked Lucina was ever present at any real birth of yours), I [conjure] you by this empty honour of my purple stripe,[[8]](#footnote-8) by Jupiter, who must disapprove of this, why are you looking at me like a step-mother,[[9]](#footnote-9) or a wild beast struck with an arrow?” While the boy made these complaints with a faltering voice, he stood with his bandages of distinction taken from him, a tender frame, such as might soften the impious breasts of the cruel Thracians; Canidia, having interwoven her hair and uncombed head with little vipers, orders wild fig-trees torn up from graves, orders funeral cypresses and eggs besmeared with the gore of a loathsome toad, and feathers of the nocturnal screech-owl, and those herbs, which lolchos, and Spain, fruitful in poisons, transmits, and bones snatched from the mouth of a hungry bitch, to be burned in Colchian flames. But Sagana, tucked up for expedition, sprinkling the waters of Avernus all over the house, bristles up with her rough hair like a sea-urchin, or a boar in the chase. Veia, deterred by no remorse of conscience, groaning with the toil, dug up the ground with the sharp spade; where the boy, fixed in, might long be tormented to death at the sight of food varied two or three times in a day: while he stood out with his face, just as much at bodies suspended by the chin [in swimming] project from the water, that his parched marrow and dried liver might be a charm for love; when once the pupils of his eyes had wasted away, fixed on the forbidden food.

Both lazy Naples and every neighboring town believed, that Folia of Ariminum, of masculine lust, was there: she, who with her Thessalian incantations forces the charmed stars and the moon from heaven. Here the fell Canidia, gnawing her untrimmed thumb with her livid teeth, what said she? or what did she not say? “O you faithful witnesses to my proceedings, Night and Diana, who preside over silence, when the secret rites are celebrated: now, now be present, now turn your anger and power against the houses of our enemies, while the savage wild beasts lie hid in the woods, dissolved in sweet repose; let the dogs of Suburra (which may be matter of ridicule for every body) bark at the aged rake, bedaubed with ointment, such as my hands never made any more exquisite. What is the matter? Why are these songs less efficacious than those of the barbarian Medea? by means of which she made her escape, after she got revenge on [Jason’s] haughty mistress, the daughter of the mighty Creon; when the garment, a gift that was injected with venom, took off the new bride by its firey power. And yet no herb, nor root hidden in inaccessible places, ever escaped my notice – still he sleeps in the perfumed bed of every whore, forgetting me. Ah! ah! he walks free [from my power] by the charms of some more knowing witch. Varus, (oh you that will shortly have much to lament!) you shall come back to me by means of unusual spells; nor shall you return to yourself by all the power of Marsian enchantments, I will prepare a stronger potion: I will pour in a stronger potion for you, disdainful as you are; and the heaven shall subside below the sea, with the earth extended over it, sooner than you shall not burn with love for me, in the same manner as this pitch [burns] in the sooty flames.” At these words, the boy no longer, as before, tried to move the impious hags by soothing expressions; but, doubtful in what manner he should break silence, uttered Thyestean curses. “Potions” [said he] “have a great efficacy in confounding right and wrong, but are not able to invert the condition of human nature; I will persecute you with curses; and execrating detestation is not to be expiated by any victim. Moreover, when doomed to death I shall have expired, I will attend you as a nocturnal fury; and, a ghost, I will attack your faces with my hooked talons (for such is the power of those divinities, the Manes), and, brooding upon your restless breasts, I will deprive you of rest through terror. The mob, from village to village, assaulting you on every side with stones, shall demolish you filthy hags. Finally, the wolves and Esquiline vultures shall scatter abroad your unburied limbs. Nor shall this spectacle escape the observation of my parents, who, alas! must survive me.”

Horace, *Epode V*

*In another poem of Horace’s, the priapic god Priapus, who was often left in gardens to protect them (a bit like an extremely pornographic garden gnome) watches some witches perform their rituals:*

FORMERLY I was the trunk of a wild fig-tree, an useless log:[1](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0063%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D8#note82) when the artificer, in doubt whether he should make a stool or a Priapus of me, determined that I should be a god. Henceforward I became a god, the greatest terror of thieves and birds: for my right hand restrains thieves, and a bloodylooking pole stretched out from my frightful middle: but a reed fixed upon the crown of my head terrifies the mischievous birds, and hinders them from settling in these new gardens.[2](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0063%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D8#note83) Before this the fellow-slave bore dead corpses thrown out of their narrow cells to this place, in order to be deposited in cheap coffins. This place stood a common grave for the miserable mob, for the clown Pantolabus, and Nomentanus the rake. Here a column assigned a thousand feet[3](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0063%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D8#note84) [of ground] in front, and three hundred toward the fields: that the burial-place should not descend to the heirs of the estate. Now one may live in the Esquiliae,[4](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0063%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D8#note85) as it is now a healthy place; and walk upon an open terrace, where lately the melancholy passengers beheld the ground frightful with white bones; though both the thieves and wild beasts accustomed to infest this place, do not cuase me so much care and trouble, as do [these hags], that turn people's minds by their incantations and drugs. These I can not by any means destroy nor stop, but that they will gather bones and noxious herbs, as soon as the fleeting moon[5](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0063%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D8#note86)has shown her lovely face.

I myself saw Canidia, with her sable garment tucked up, walk with bare feet and disheveled hair, yelling together with the elder Sagana. Paleness had rendered both of them horrible to behold. They began to claw up the earth with their nails, and to tear a black ewe-lamb to pieces with their teeth. The blood was poured into a ditch, that they might charm out the shades[6](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0063%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D8#note87) of the dead, ghosts that were to give them answers. There was a woollen effigy[7](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0063%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D8#note88) too, another of wax: the woollen one larger, which was to inflict punishment on the little one[8](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0063%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D8#note89). The waxen stood in a suppliant posture, as ready to perish in a servile manner. One of the hags invokes Hecate, and the other grim Tisiphone. Then might you see serpents and infernal bitches[9](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0063%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D8#note90) wander about; and the moon with blushes hiding behind the lofty monuments, that she might not be a witness to these doings. But if I lie, even a tittle, may my head be contaminated with the white filth of ravens; and may Julius and the effeminate Pediatous, and the knave Voranus, come to piss upon me, and befoul me. Why should I mention every particular? viz. in what manner, speaking alternately with Sagana, the ghosts uttered dismal and piercing shrieks; and how by stealth they laid in the earth a wolf's beard, with the teeth of a spotted snake; and how a great blaze flamed forth from the waxen image? And how I was shocked at the voices and actions of these two furies, a spectator however by no means incapable of revenge? For from my cleft body of fig-tree wood I uttered a loud noise with as great an explosion as a burst bladder. But they ran into the city: and with egreat laughter and amusement you could have seen Canidia's false teeth and Sagana's towering wig of false hair falling off, and the herbs, as well as the enchanted bracelets from her arms.

Horace, *Satire* 1.8

*Finally, here is a section from a fragmentary 1st century CE Roman novel, the Satyricon by Petronius. It shows how anyone (even a Roman soldier) can be hiding something, and how people talked about and feared witches. The scene is a feast given by a rather revolting Roman freedman called Trimalchio and the first speaker is a guest, another freedman:*

When I was still a slave, we lived in a narrow street; the house is Gavilla's now. There, as the gods would have it, I fell in love with Terentius, the inn-keeper's wife; you all knew Melissa from Tarentum, the prettiest of pretty wenches! Not that I courted her just for sex or pleasure of that sort, but more because she was such a good sort. Nothing I asked did she ever refuse; if she made a penny, I got a halfpenny; whatever I saved, I put in her purse, and she never cheated me. Well! her husband died when they were at a country house. So I moved heaven and earth to get to her; true friends, you know, are proved in adversity.

72 "It so happened my master had gone to Capua, to attend to various trifles of business. So seizing the opportunity, I persuade our lodger to accompany me as far as the fifth milestone. He was a soldier, as bold as Hell. We got under way about first cockcrow, with the moon shining as bright as day. We arrive at the tombs; my man lingers behind among the gravestones, whilst I sit down singing, and start counting the gravestones. Presently I looked back for my comrade; he had stripped off all his clothes and laid them down by the wayside. My heart was in my mouth; and there I stood feeling like a dead man. Then he pissed all round the clothes, and in an instant changed into a wolf. Don't imagine I'm joking; I would not tell a lie for the finest fortune ever man had. However, as I was telling you, directly he was turned into a wolf, he set up a howl, and away to the woods. At first I didn't know where I was, but presently I went forward to gather up his clothes; but lo and behold! they were turned into stone. If ever a man was like to die of terror, I was that man! Still I drew my sword and let out at every shadow on the road till I arrived at my sweetheart's house. I rushed in looking like a ghost, soul and body barely sticking together. The sweat was pouring down between my legs, my eyes were set, my wits gone almost past recovery. Melissa was astounded at my plight, wondering why ever I was abroad so late. 'Had you come a little sooner,' she said, 'you might have given us a hand; a wolf broke into the farm and has slaughtered all the cattle, just as if a butcher had bled them. Still he didn't altogether have the laugh on us, though he did escape; for one of the laborers ran him through the neck with a pike.'

"After hearing this, I could not close an eye, but directly it was broad daylight, I started off for our good Gaius's house, like a peddler whose pack's been stolen; and coming to the spot where the clothes had been turned into stone, I found nothing whatever but a pool of blood. When eventually I got home, there lay my soldier a-bed like a great ox, while a surgeon was dressing his neck. I saw at once he was a werewolf and I could never afterwards eat bread with him, no! not if you'd killed me. Other people may think what they please; but as for me, if I'm telling you a lie, may your guardian spirits confound me!"

73 We were all struck dumb with amazement, till Trimalchio broke the silence, saying, "Far be it from me to doubt your story; if you'll believe me, my hair stood on end, for I know Niceros is not the man to repeat idle fables; he's perfectly trustworthy and anything but a babbler. Now! I'll tell you a horrible tale myself, as much out of the common as an ass on the tiles! “I was still but a long-haired lad (for I led a life of luxury from a boy) when our master's pet[[10]](#footnote-10) died,--a pearl, by heaven! a paragon of perfection at all points. Well! as his poor mother was mourning him, and several of us besides condoling with her, all of a sudden the witches set up their hullabaloo, for all the world like a hound in full cry after a hare. At that time we had a Cappadocian in the household, a tall fellow, and a high-spirited, and strong enough to lift a mad bull off its feet. This man gallantly drawing his sword, dashed out in front of the house door, first winding his cloak carefully round his left arm, and lunging out, as it might be there--no harm to what I touch--ran a woman clean through. We heard a groan, but the actual witches (I'm very particular to tell the exact truth) we did not see. Coming in again, our champion threw himself down on a bed and his body was black and blue all over, just as if he had been scourged with whips, for it seems an evil hand had touched him. We barred the door and turned back afresh to our lamentations, but when his mother threw her arms round her boy and touched his dead body, she found nothing but a wisp of straw. It had neither heart, nor entrails, nor anything else; for the witches had whipped away the lad and left a changeling of straw in his place. Now I ask you, can you help after this believing there are wise women, and hags that fly by night. But our tall bully, after what happened, never got back his color, in fact a few days afterward he died raving mad!"

74 We listened with wonder and credulity in equal proportions, and kissing the table, besought the Night-hags to stay indoors, while we were returning home.

Petronius, *Satyricon* 71-74

1. The *Natural History* was a gift to the Emperor Titus and represented cutting edge knowledge of the time. Pliny the Elder (not to be confused with his nephew and adopted son, Pliny the Younger) did a tremendous amount of research for this book, and must have ransacked every library in the empire – he also had personal knowledge of the empire as he served in high ranking positions in Germany, Africa, Spain, and Gaul, among other places. Please let that sink in as you read some of what he says, and reflect on what that means about what educated and elite Romans were willing to believe. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A city in Caria (now part of Turkey). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Thessalian woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Grease from unwashed wool/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stoa is a Greek word for a portico; this building dated from the 5th century BCE, and was associated with the Stoic school of philosophy, who took their name from ‘stoa.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Children, unless they were very young, would not necessarily stay with their mother after their father’s death, as, if they were Roman citizens, they were legally part of his family, and more closely attached to them. A tutor (guardian) would be appointed from them, most likely from the husband’s close relatives, if there were any alive. And Roman law stipulated that Roman widows of an age to bear children had only one year for mourning before they could lose certain privileges or be fined. They might ignore this or get a legal exemption, but families might urge widows to remarry, for the very reasons Apuleius lists above. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Romans really did believe this and all sorts of other amazing things about beavers, including that a single drop of beaver oil caused miscarriages. See Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* Book 8.47 and 32.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Children wore a purple stripe on their toga. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Romans portrayed stepmothers, almost without exception, as evil and keen on killing their stepchildren so theirs would inherit more of the estate. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Romans kept young slave children as type of pets and this is what that is referring to. Yes, it is awful. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)