

OLD WOMEN PRACTISING MAGIC: DEFINING FEATURES OF *LENAE* FROM PLAUTUS TO OVID

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RESUMEN

Las *lenae*, figura presente en todos los elegíacos latinos, son a menudo retratadas con muchos aspectos negativos que remontan, por lo menos, hasta el tiempo de Plauto. El comediógrafo, en sus piezas, las retrata siempre como viejas, antiguas prostitutas y adictas al alcohol. Tibulo, Propertio y Ovidio utilizan los tópicos de la tradición literaria precedente, pero añaden también el tema de la magia. En este texto exploraré la relación de los tópicos característicos de las *lenae* en Plauto y en los elegíacos, intentando también esclarecer las posibles razones para el retrato tan negativo de estas mujeres.

PALAVRAS CLAVE

Lenae, *meretrices*, magia, elegíacos latinos.

Ancient sources gave us many literary descriptions of women practising several kinds of magic. It happens that among Ancient authors only a small group of women are described as being young: naturally, Medea and the young girl Simaetha from Theocritus' second *Idyll*. Both suffer from an unrequited love and try everything to conquer the passion of their beloved. Theocritus, for example, describes Simaetha as a real girl, a typical product from Hellenistic literature, that lives in a constant state of desperation, with Charles Segal reinforcing that, during her monologue, her tone is objective and innocent¹.

As opposed to what happens among the Greek sorceresses, in the Roman world all the literary portraits of women practising magic belong to old women, and the *lenae*, procuresses or go-between, were one of the most famous of this kind of characters. Perhaps the most ancient descriptions we have of this kind of women go back to the time of Plautus. In a wide number of comedies, the *lenae* assume a variety of forms: they are seen as mothers of other *meretrices*, maid-servants, gate-keepers, and so on. In the *Cistellaria* (38-41), the *lena* tells to Selenium that she is a freedwoman and because of that she became a courtesan, and declares that the motive of the prostitution of one of her daughters is because she had anything to eat:

quia nos libertinae sumus, et ego et mater tua, ambae
meretrices fuimus: illa te, ego hanc mihi educaui

¹ C. Segal, "Simaetha and the Iunx (Theocritus, Idyll II)", *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 17, 1973, 32-43.

40 ex patribus conuenticiis. neque ego hanc superbiai
causa pepuli ad meretricium quaestum, nisi ut ne esurirem.

Because we're freedwomen, I and your mother, we were both prostitutes; she brought you up for herself and I this girl here, from fathers met by chance. I didn't push her into prostitution out of pride, only in order not to starve².

Another feature of these *lenae* is their fondness for drink, since they are many times represented as women addicted to alcohol. It is probable that Plautus took the figure of the drunk procuress from Greek New Comedy³, but as with so many other characters from his comedies, Plautus works with figures recognizable to the audiences of his plays. The audience must identify these characteristics in the characters of the play so that people may laugh. If Plautus highlights the addiction the *lenae* have to consume alcohol, it is because this was a feature common enough in the daily life of that time, so people could easily recognize it. Another good example of this feature may be found in the *Curculio* (75-77):

75 iam scies.
anus hic solet cubitare custos ianitrix,
nomen Leaeneae est, multibiba atque merobiba.

You'll know in a moment. Normally an old woman sleeps here, the guardian and keeper of the door. Her name is Leaena. She's a great drinker of undiluted wine⁴.

According to Plautus, this Leaena has an unusual appetite for wine, and is attracted just by the smell of it. But, besides this example, there are so many other *lenae* addicted to alcohol: in the *Miles Gloriosus*, the soldier offers wine to a *lena* in order to gain her favours⁵.

The fact that they are mostly old women shall not constitute a surprise either. It is, in fact, quite common to see that in literature old women work as go-betweens with younger girls, giving them advice and sometimes performing magical rites. Ovid gives a good example of that in *Fasti* 2.571-582, where the poet states that the rites dedicated to the goddess Tacita are commanded by an old woman (*ecce anus in mediis residens annosa puellis*), who also has an addiction to wine (579-580):

uina quoque instillat: uini quodcumque relictum est,
aut ipsa aut comites, plus tamen ipsa, bibit.

She also drips wine over it. She drinks the leftovers of the wine with her companions, but she herself drinks the greater part⁶.

Besides their bibulous addiction, old women are mainly portrayed as magic practitioners. Safe few exceptions from Greek mythology and literature like Medea, Circe

² Transl. W. De Melo, *Plautus. Casina, The Casket Comedy, Curculio, Epidicus, The Two Menaechmuses*, Cambridge (Mass.), 2011, esp. 139-141.

³ See M. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, London, 2001, esp. 176. See also Herodas *Mimiamboi* I, that tells the story of a *hetaira* called Metriche.

⁴ Transl. De Melo, *Plautus. Casina...*, 237.

⁵ Cf. Dickie, *Magic...*, 178 for other examples of women addicted to alcohol in the Plautinian comedy.

⁶ Transl. D. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greco-Roman World*, Oxford, 2009, esp. 129.

and Theocritus' Simaetha, Roman literature is full of references to old women practising magical rites⁷.

In what concerns the audience of the Plautinian comedies, as I have said, it was mandatory that the audience understood what they were watching so that the comic effect could be accomplished. So Plautus furnished the figure of the *lena* in his plays with all the characteristics *lenae* probably had in daily life. The figure of those characters must make someone remember other people from their quotidian and recognize their characteristics, addictions and habits. Concerning old women practising love magic in Roman comedies, it seems relevant to recall the example of Lucius Afranius, a comic playwright from the second century BCE, who, in a play called *Vopiscus*, talks about love-philtres. In that fragmentary excerpt it is possible to see some topics that will be treated by the elegists, like the reference to old women and their usual relation with magical practices. But it also seems to be significant that Lucius Afranius dedicated a comedy (or at least a scene) to love magic. It is a clear signal that his audience was acquainted with these kind of practices. As Matthew Dickie notes, this playwright, unlike Plautus, wrote *comoediae togatae*, which means they are following a typical Roman scenario. They are not *commoediae palliatae*, whose setting and characters were Greek, like Plautus and Terentius wrote. If Lucius Afranius, in one of his comedies, brought the theme of love magic to a Roman audience, it seems natural that people would recognize those topics.

As Dickie pointed out⁸, referring to Plautus:

Plautus is not, accordingly, merely taking something from his Greek original that has very little meaning for his Roman audience. He plays on a notion that is thoroughly familiar to the Romans. Now the way in which this group of words is employed is a good indication of how familiar most Romans must have been with various forms of magic-working.

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The references to alcohol and old age of these women are all well in evidence in some elegies of Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid. The main difference we can find between these poems and the comedies of Plautus is that Roman elegists give this theme a more romantic treatment, although they work the same topics as Plautus did, but insisting more in their magical powers and experience. Roman love elegists portray the *lenae* as threats to their relation with their *puellae*, since these procuresses assume the role of *praeceptorices amoris*, giving those girls advice to find rich men that can give them more than simple verses.

Ovid, in *Am.* 1.8, gives a complete portrait of a certain *lena* called Dipsas, which combines all the characteristics observed previously: advanced age, alcoholism and magic. The poet opens his poem presenting (1-4) the woman and telling her name:

est quaedam – quicumque uolet cognoscere lenam,
audiat! – est quaedam nomine Dipsas anus.
ex re nomen habet – nigri non illa parentem

⁷ M. Robinson, *A Commentary on Ovid's Fasti Book 2*, Oxford, 2011, esp. 260, gives a good account of this. For example, Theoc. *Id.* 2.91; Plaut. *Cist.* 290; Tib. 1.5.12, 1.8.17-18; Ov. *Ars am.* 2.329-330, *Rem. am.* 254.

⁸ Dickie, *Magic...*, 131.

Memnonis in roseis sobria uidit equis.

There is this (listen up, if you want to learn about a bawd!), there is this old woman called Dipsas. Her name is a significant one: she has never seen roseate-horsed Dawn, the mother of black Memnon, in a state of sobriety⁹.

The woman's name (although real or not) makes allusion to a snake (διψάς) that was thought to suffer from a huge thirst¹⁰ and whose bite inflicted also a great thirst on its victims¹¹. This seems to be a common property of this kind of women, since, as McKeown points out, «prostitutes and *lenae*, in real life as well as in literature, often adopted the names of reptiles and other equally unsexed animals»¹². The couplet that follows the presentation of this *lena*'s name highlights her fondness for alcohol, since, as the text says, she had never looked at dawn sober. Her name underlines her thirst for wine; it seems to be relatively common to certain kinds of women to have names connected to alcohol. The *Anthologia Palatina* provides us with examples of epitaphs of women addicted to alcohol, like, for example, *Anth. Pal.* 7.353, that, in a jocose tone, makes reference to a certain Maronis, whose only cause of lament was not having wine to drink¹³:

τῆς πολιῆς τόδε σῆμα Μαρωνίδος, ἧς ἐπὶ τύμβῳ
 γλυπτὴν ἐκ πέτρης αὐτὸς ὄρης κύλικα.
 Ἡ δὲ φιλάκρητος καὶ αἰεὶ λάλος οὐκ ἐπὶ τέκνοις
 μύρεται, οὐ τεκέων ἀκτεάνῳ πατέρι,
 5 ἐν δὲ τόδ' αἰάζει καὶ ὑπ' ἠρίον, ὅτι τὸ Βάκχου
 ἄρμενον οὐ Βακχοῦ πλήρες ἔπεστι τάφῳ.

This is the monument of the grey-haired Maronis, on whose tomb you see a wine cup carved in stone. She, the wine-bibber and chatterer, is not sorry for her children or her children's destitute father, but one thing she laments even in her grave, that the device of the wine-god on the tomb is not full of wine¹⁴.

Ovid, at the end of this poem, curses the *lena* wishing her a long thirst. The same does Propertius in 4.5.2, where the poet also curses the *lena* wishing thirst to her shadow (*et tua, quod non uis, sentiat umbra sitim*). Tibullus (1.5.49-50) wishes the *lena* to drink bitter cups filled with gall, replacing perhaps the wine typically associated to these women (*atque ore cruento / tristia cum multo pocula felle bibat*)¹⁵. Every poet curses the *lenae* of their poems, wishing them punishments concerning the addictions they have: thirst, hunger and death. Ovid, for example, closes his elegy wishing Dipsas she has no home, a poor senescence and a perpetual thirst. All these curses constitute a certain kind of revenge of the poet since all of them are focused on particular features that best

⁹ Transl. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft...*, 128.

¹⁰ Luc. 9.609-610.

¹¹ Nicander (*Ther.* 338-342) tells about the consequence of being bitten by this snake. Lucan (9.737ff.) tells the story of Aulus, a young standard-bearer from Cato's troops, that has walked on a dipsas and describes the effects of this snake's bite. See also Lucian's *Dipsads* for a more detailed information about this kind of snake.

¹² J.C. McKeown, *Ovid: Amores. A commentary on Book I*, vol. 2, Leeds, 1989, esp. 202.

¹³ For other examples of similar epitaphs, see *Anth. Pal.* 6.291, 7.456, 11.409, 7.455 and 7.457.

¹⁴ Transl. W. R. Paton, *The Greek Anthology*, vol. 2, Cambridge (Mass.), 1960, esp. 191.

¹⁵ Cf. P. Murgatroyd, *Tibullus. Commentary on Book I*, Pietermaritzburg, 1980 and R. Maltby, *Tibullus. Elegies. Text, Introduction and Commentary*, Leeds, 2002, ad loc.

characterise these women. This is a tradition that probably goes back to the time of Plautus: in the *Mostellaria* (191-193), Philolacles curses the *lena* of this comedy using the same topics as the elegists:

Pro Iuppiter, nam quod malum uersatur meae domi illud?
di deaeque me omnes pessumis exemplis interficiant,
nisi ego illam anum interfecero siti fameque atque algu.

O Jupiter! What crooked creature is this living in my house? May all the gods and goddesses kill me in the most horrible way if I don't kill that old woman with thirst, hunger and cold¹⁶.

It is also noteworthy to see that all three elegists compare the *lenae* to animals, connecting them to underworld dogs, wolves and owls. Propertius (4.5.13-17) says that Acanthis was expert in assuming the shape of a wolf and talked to *striges*¹⁷ in order to take care of his blood:

15 audax cantatae leges imponere lunae
 et sua nocturno fallere terga lupo,
posset ut intentos astu caecare maritos,
 cornicum immeritas eruit ungue genas;
consuluitque striges nostro de sanguine [...]

She was bold enough to bewitch the moon and impose her orders on it, and to change her form into that of a nocturnal wolf, so that she could, by her craft, blind keenly watchful husbands. With her nail she tore out the eyes of crows – they did not deserve this – and asked the screech owls about my blood¹⁸.

She tells laws to the bewitched moon, since magical practices are commonly done by night, but she is also able to transform herself into a wolf. Comparing Acanthis to a wolf may not be innocent, since wolves are mentioned several times in the *Greek Magical Papyri*, and Propertius may be playing with the folklore of his own time concerning the superstitions around this animal. Let me also recall the figures of Moeris from Vergil's eighth *Eclogue* and Niceros' tale in Petronius' *Satyricon* that transform themselves into wolves. Dipsas is also able to change her shape and to cover her old body with feathers (*hanc ego nocturnas uersam uolitare per umbras / suspicor et pluma corpus anile tegi*)¹⁹.

¹⁶ Transl. De Melo, *Plautus. The Merchant, The Braggart Soldier, The Ghost, The Persian*, Cambridge (Mass.), 2011, esp. 333.

¹⁷ For the identification of *striges* or *strigae* in classical literature, see C. McDonough, "Carna, Proca and the *Strix* on the Kalends of June", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 127, 1997, 315-344, L. Cherubini, "Inganni e disinganni delle streghe in Petr. 63", *Quaderni del Ramo d'Oro* 2, 2009, 143-155 and B.S. Spaeth, "The Terror that Comes in the Night: The Night Hag and Supernatural Assault in Latin Literature", in E.J. Scioli – C. Walde (edd.), "*Sub imagine somni*": *Nighttime Phenomena in Greco-Roman Culture*, Pisa, 2010, 231-258.

¹⁸ Transl. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft...*, 127.

¹⁹ The elegists are not the only poets that compare women/witches that perform magic to animals. At the beginning of *Epode* 5, Horace starts describing Canidia as having her hair entwined by snakes (15-16 *Canidia, breuibus implicata uiperis / crinis...*), the same does Lucan, describing Erichtho (6.656 *et coma uipereis substringitur horrida sertis*). Although the relation of Horace with Canidia is not the same the elegists have with their *lenae*, the repulsion felt in the description is identical. All the poets connect these women to animals whose activity is essentially nocturnal, since they are also related to magical rituals, which were performed by night. See C. Tesoriero, *A Commentary on Lucan Bellum Civile* 6.333-830.

All these *lenae* share the same topics concerning magical practices: Dipsas is expert in drawing down the moon, evoking the spirits of the dead, opening the earth with a magical charm; Acanthis collects the hippomanes and is able to make people fall in love. But why Augustan poets insist so much in these magical powers and only attribute them to such a gory and marginal characters as these ancient prostitutes that live outside the civic order and religion?

Trying to respond to the question raised in the last section, a possible reason may be connected with the suppression of magic that was practised in their time. Repression measures related to magic date already from the early times of the Roman Republic. In a brief summary, it is possible to highlight the *XII Leges Tabularum*, which state that it is forbidden to charm away another's crops and to pronounce magical spells against other people²⁰. After the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*, that forbade the performance of rites by men or women²¹, the *Lex Cornelia de Sicariis et Veneficiis* appeared in 81 BCE, under L. Cornelius Sulla. We depend on other sources and testimonies from Antiquity for understanding this law concerning magical practices²².

When we get to the time of Augustus it is possible to see that many measures concerning magic were taken. During the Second Triumvirate, Agrippa expelled from Rome the astrologers and sorcerers. But most important to refer is the speech that Dio Cassius puts in Agrippa's mouth (52.36). In 29 BCE, already after the Battle of Actium, Agrippa speaks to Augustus:

τοὺς δὲ δὴ ξενίζοντάς τι περὶ αὐτὸ καὶ μίσει καὶ κόλαζε, μὴ μόνον τῶν θεῶν ἕνεκα, ὃν ὁ καταφρονήσας οὐδ' ἄλλου ἄν τις προτιμήσειεν, ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ καινὰ τινα δαιμόνια οἱ τοιοῦτοι ἀντεσφύροντες πολλοὺς ἀναπείθουσιν ἀλλοτριονομεῖν, κάκ τούτου καὶ συνωμοσίαι καὶ συστάσεις ἐταιρεῖαι τε γίνονται, ἅπερ ἥκιστα μοναρχία συμφέρει. μήτ' οὖν ἀθέω τινὶ μήτε γόητι συγχωρήσης εἶναι.

You should hate and punish those who introduce foreign elements into our religion, not just for the sake of the gods (for if a man despises the gods, he could hardly have respect for anyone else), but because men of this sort, by importing new powers, persuade many people to take up foreign customs, and from this are born conspiracies and gatherings and secret clubs, which are the last thing a monarchy needs. Do not then permit people to be atheists or sorcerers²³.

Agrippa, in Dio Cassius' words, made clear that those not practising the religion of the city must be expelled, since, if they do not respect any god, they will not respect anything. Thus, one of the main characteristics of *lenae* is that they are women that live apart from society because of their condition. Since they are experts in magical arts, they

Doctoral thesis, University of Sidney, Sidney, 2005, ad loc. See also L. Watson, *A Commentary on Horace's Epodes*, Oxford, 2003 and M. Korenjak, *Die Erichthoszene im Lukans Pharsalia. Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar*, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, ad loc.

²⁰ There are many ancient sources that talk about the crime of charming away someone's crops: Servius' comment to Verg. *Ecl.* 8.99; August. *De Civ. D.* 8.19. For other literary sources see Ov. *Am.* 3.7.31 *carmine laesa Ceres sterilem uanescit in herbam*; Plin. *HN* 18.8.41-43 and Apul. *Apol.* 47. For an extensive reading about magic sanctions on the Twelve Tables, see E. Massonneau, *Le Crime de Magie et le Droit Romain*, Paris, 1933, esp. 136-150, and J. Rives, "Magic in the XII Tables Revisited", *Classical Quarterly* 52, 2002, 270-290.

²¹ See Livy 39.8.14. For a full translation of the *Senatus Consultum* see Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft...*, 278.

²² For full discussion about the *Lex Cornelia*, see J. Rives, "Magic in the Roman Law: The Reconstruction of a Crime", *Classical Antiquity* 22, 2003, 313-339.

²³ Transl. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft...*, 280.

do not worship the solar gods of the Olympic pantheon, rather they are more connected with chthonic deities. One of the arts in which they are versed are necromantic rites. This can be seen in Tibullus (1.5.51): during his curse to the *lena*, she wishes ghosts (perhaps the same ghosts she evokes) to fly around her, wailing her fate. Another testimony to necromantic rites performed by a *lena* belongs to Ovid (*Am.* 1.8.17-18):

euocat antiquis proauos atausque sepulcris
et solidam longo carmine findit humum.

She calls forth great-grandfathers and the great-grandfathers of great-grandfathers from their ancient tombs and cleaves open the solid ground with a protracted incantation²⁴.

These necromantic rites, or divination using corpses, are inserted in the group of practices that were forbidden during the time of Augustus. Agrippa refers to them, among certainly others, as strange rites. Some years later, in 11 BCE, Augustus, according to Dio Cassius (56.23), bans divination to individuals including divination related to death.²⁵ Although this expulsion took place some years after these elegies were written, it already shows the sentiments that necromancy and magic in general had during Augustus' principate, since as Ogden has noted, «the divination of death was the sort of prediction to which necromancy above all lent itself»²⁶. Thus it seems plausible to think that one of the reasons why *lenae* were so hated by the elegists is because these poets may reflect in their poetry a feeling about magic repression that went through all the principate of Augustus²⁷.

Spaeth also points out that the literary representations of this kind of women were made during a period of social, political and cultural turbulence, stressing that gender roles were particularly affected²⁸. In fact, Roman society suffered great changes in the last years of the Republic and the beginning of the principate. Starting with the turbulence generated after Julius Caesar's death and the persecution of his murderers, Rome witnessed social and cultural changes. A new order was born. Also with that order new values came and a renewed moral vision. The representation of these kinds of women may, then, correspond to a response to the poets' own time. Probably the repression of these practices was felt by the poets in order to make a symbolic restructuring of their own poetic world.

The figures of the *lenae*, as they are described in Plautus or in the Latin elegiacs, naturally correspond to a set of literary topics and their treatment is expressly negative, especially in the elegists, since they want to denigrate the image of these women that try

²⁴ Transl. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft...*, 128.

²⁵ Dio Cassius 56.23: τότε δ' οὖν ταῦτά τε οὕτως ἐπράχθη, καὶ τοῖς μάντεσιν ἀπηγορεύθη μήτε κατὰ μόνας τινὶ μήτε περὶ θανάτου, μηδ' ἂν ἄλλοι συμπαρῶσιν οἱ, χρᾶν. «It was forbidden that diviners [*manteis*] should give divinations to individuals or give any divination on the subject of death, not even of other people were present». Transl. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft...*, 281.

²⁶ D. Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, Princeton, 2001, esp. 156.

²⁷ See F.H. Cramer, "Expulsion of astrologers from ancient Rome", *Classica et Mediaevalia* 12, 1950, 9-50 and G. Andrikopoulos, *Magic and the Roman Emperors*. Doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, Exeter, 2009.

²⁸ B.S. Spaeth, "From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and Roman Witch in Classical Literature", in K.B. Stratton – D.S. Kalleres (edd.), *Daughters of Hecate. Women and Magic in the Ancient World*, Oxford, 2014, 41-70, esp. 54: «The reality may not have been that women were in fact changing their behaviour; however, the literary representations of that behaviour indicate a perception of such a change».

to take their *puellae* and make them find richer lovers. By denigrating the image of the *lenae*, they valorize their own image. However, the treatment given to the figure of these women is not a casual one. Plautus plays with the common knowledge people had about the figure of the *lenae*, highlighting some specific topics like their old age and their addiction to alcohol. In a time where the notion of magic was not still fully developed as it will be a few centuries later, Plautus does not explore this feature. Later the Roman elegists will recover the Plautinian topics concerning these old women but give them a renewed treatment: as poets integrated in a regime focused on establishing social and moral order, they depict *lenae* not only as old and drunk women but also as dark creatures expert in magical arts, acting secretly against the new measures and legislation created by Augustus and others like Agrippa. So, and to conclude, the *lenae* are used as models for what should be forbidden and avoided, representing and impersonating some of the enemies of the new Augustan regime.

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