Witches and Hags: Crash Course World Mythology #39

Crash Course: World Mythology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=0OCPQG4bMFs
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/0OCPQG4bMFs

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Mythology and, today, we're gonna shift just slightly from our discussion of monsters to talk about monstrous humans. Monsterous human women, to be exact. We're discussing witches and hags. Many scary, magical ladies.

You know what's scariest about them? It's their giant, gross moles. Just kidding! It's their habit of turning people into stone. Thoth? No!

[Opening music]

Before we start, a quick reminder that many cultures which created these myths are patriarchal and many of the stories we're going to look at are more than a little misogynistic. Devoting an episode to terrifying women doesn't mean we're endorsing the idea that women, especially older, wiser women, are horrible.

And actually in many stories it's not even clear whether these women are really so horrible. They may be just trying to protect themselves and their place in the social or metaphysical order. Really, one myth's forest hag might be another's fairy godmother after just a little shift in perspective. Anyway, just something to keep in mind while we're dissing on all these hags.

So, when I say "witch" there's almost certainly an image that comes to mind. Many myths, especially folk and fairy tales, feature old women described as ugly or misshapen, and with frightening magical powers. There are a few exceptions, but most witches use their powers for evil.

Depending upon the tradition, "witch" is synonymous with or akin to "hag." In many myths, hags are magical old women who are responsible for giving people bad dreams. Some hags even sit on the chest of their sleeping victims, sprinkling bad images into their minds.

In Norse mythology mare, or Mara, and they come in the night to torment you. A mare at night. A nightmare, get it? That's a thing! A nightmare!

In Celtic mythology there's a hag called the Cailleach, who often appears with a staff and likes to make everybody cold and miserable. In one Scottish tradition, she comes down from her mountain home on November 1st, beats her staff on the ground, and ushers in winter. But not all Cailleachs manifest such awesome power. In one story, the Cailleach is basically just a petty thief.

This story begins long ago in the parish of Kirk Lonan where the widow Ena McCarran lives with her three daughters Calybrid, Calyphony, and Calyvorra. Their father, having died years ago, left behind a leather bag full of gold coins that Ena keeps under the hearthstone in front of the fire. The gold coins are how she provides for the family.

One day, an old hag comes knocking at the door - spoiler alert, she's the Cailleach. And she's a hungry Cailleach at that. Ena just sees an old woman though, and she doesn't like to turn a beggar away so she invites the Cailleach in for soup. When she returns with a shawl to comfort the shivering old woman, the Cailleach is gone and so is the McCarran's stash.

Without their gold, the family is hungry and desperate. Eventually Calybrid, the oldest, tells her mother that she's leaving to make her fortune and that if she doesn't return in a year, they can assume that she's made it big. Ena bakes her daughter an oak cake for her journey. But before sending her off, Ena asks for one piece of it in exchange for a blessing. But Calybrid doesn't know when she's gonna have her next meal so she refuses her mother.

Early in her journey, Calybrid finds a house and surprise! The Cailleach lives there. The Cailleach offers Calybrid a job as her maid, but only on one condition: never clean the chimney. Calybrid agrees and goes to sleep. The next day, Calybrid definitely looks in the chimney were low and behold she finds her family's lost bag of gold. Without thinking twice she sets out for home.

So, let's see what happens next in the thought bubble.

On her way home, Calybrid passes a horse who asks her to rub him down. Calybrid refuses. Later, she passes a sheep who asks her to shear him. Again, she refuses. Then she passes a goat, a lime kiln, a cow, and finally a mill. Refuses them all. At this point, she's so tired that she goes inside the mill and falls asleep.

In the meantime, the Cailleach returns home to find that the bag of gold is missing. Running outside, she finds a horse. "Have you seen a girl pass this way?"

"I have," says the horse. The same with the sheep, the goat, the lime kiln, the cow, and the mill, who says, "I've got her sleeping inside me, right now." The Cailleach creeps inside and touches Calybrid's shoulder with a hazel wand, turning her into stone.

A year and a day later, the second daughter, Calyphony decides it's her turn to go fortune seeking and it's the same deal: oat cake, no blessing, maid job, chimney, bag grab, horse, sheep, goat, kiln, cow, mill, refusal, falling asleep, and - yep - turned to stone.

Another year and a day later, it's Calyvorra's turn. Unlike her greedy sisters, she gives a piece of the oatcake to her mother. She takes the job, steals the gold, gets on her way. But, when she comes across the horse, she rubs it down. She shears the sheep, and changes the goat's tether, cleans the lime kiln and milks the cow. She turns the mill and, after all her hard work, she falls asleep on a sack of flour, presumably not noticing the stone statues of her sisters.

When the Cailleach rushes off to find Calyvorra, she asks the animals and the kiln if they have seen her, and each one says no. When she gets to the mill and asks if it saw the girl, the mill catches the Cailleach in its cogs and grinds her up.

The Cailleach's screams wake Calyvorra and the helpful mill tells her to pick up the wand and touch the stones in the corner. As soon as the wand touches them, they turn back into her very surprised sisters. The mill then tells Calyvorra to touch the wand to the leather bag and it will never be empty, and then to burn the wand so it can never harm anyone again. The girls do as they're told and return home to their mother with the leather bag.

This story contains a lot of familiar tropes of the dangerous and devious witch: she looks like an old woman, she shows up on someone's doorstep, she has a house in the woods, and she has a magic wand that she uses for nefarious purposes. And like monsters and mythical creatures, she's notable for her ugly, wrinkly appearance. It's kind of a bummer that old age is used as a sign of evil so often. I mean, I've met a ton of old folks and only like six of them tops were probably magical villains.

Another hideous old woman who is more than she seems is Baba Yaga. And no, the story is not about John Wick. It's about the hag of Russia and Eastern Europe. But she's just as terrifying if you cross her, with bulging eyes that can turn people to stone. Apparently, stoning people is like, the go-to spell for old magical ladies.

Anyway, she lives alone in a birch forest in a hut that sits atop a pair of chicken legs. The hut is surrounded by human skulls and each day the hut is visited by three ghostly riders: one dressed in white,

one in red, and one in black. These riders represent the passage of time.

Baba Yaga flies through the night sky on a giant mortar that she rose with a giant pestle. She wipes away her tracks with a birch broom and, like the Windigo, she's a cannibal with a penchant for luring princesses to her hut for, ahem, dinner.

According to Brenda Rosin, some scholars believe that originally, Baba Yaga was a potent female nature spirit, a provider of healing, protection, and guidance. In this respect, she's similar to another terrifying female creature from Greek mythology.

The Gorgon, Medusa. This snake-headed , tone-making lady may not seem to be much of a protector or a guide. But there's one myth that says blood from the right side of a Gorgon can bring a corpse back to life. While blood from the left side is deadly poison. Turns out, also, the name Medusa is related to the Ancient Greek word for 'protect' and can be translated as 'guardian.' So maybe she just had a bad reputation because of mean old Perseus and, of course, her petrifying visage.

These three different frightening females are from different times and places, but they have a number of things in common. They're hideous, ancient, and dangerous. One wrong move, and you get turned to stone. Hags are seen as monstrous because of their ability to transform themselves and others, and their tricky, conniving ways.

But, perhaps they also reflect a societal discomfort with old age, which works its own transformations on the body. And in cultures that valorize youth, that old age can seem terrifying. Especially when it comes to women. But old age is also very powerful. Especially when you have a hazel wand or a snake hairdo to swing around.

Next time, we start our two episode wrap up of the whole series! I know, I'm gonna miss you too, Thoth. I'm also gonna miss you guys. We're gonna talk about Freud and Jung and the psychological aspects of mythology.

Thanks for watching. We'll see you soon. Unless Baba Yaga sees you first.

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