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Random Thoughts about Restless Women

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Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Focal, fios agus foghlaim

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Citation for published version (APA):

Borsje, J. (2016). Random Thoughts about Restless Women. In *Focal, fios agus foghlaim: Тезисы международной конференции, посвященной отечественной школе кельтологии и юбилею д.ф.н., профессора Татьяны Андреевны Михайловой* (pp. 10-15). Сектор анатолийских и кельтских языков Института языкознания РАН, кафедра германской и кельтской филологии Московского государственного университета им. Ломоносова. http://iling-ran.ru/conferences/2016_focal_fios_agus_foghlaim_abstracts.pdf

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Focal, fios agus foghlaim:

Тезисы международной конференции,
посвященной отечественной школе кельтологии
и юбилею д.ф.н., профессора
Татьяны Андреевны Михайловой

Москва 2016

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Random Thoughts about Restless Women

The evening of 31 October 2011, a dimly lit class-room in Moscow State University. Tatyana Mikhailova has invited me to give a talk to her students about the connections between Samain/Halloween and human sacrifice. It gets really interesting when I stop talking and Tatyana begins. She is a transformed woman when she speaks Russian instead of English. I see the students watching her eagerly, laughing at her many jokes, enthralled by the tales she tells. Fortunately, Elena Parina joins me and gives an English summary of Tatyana's words. At some stage, we are suddenly in a debate. I am inclined to take stories about human sacrifice with a pinch of salt, at which Tatyana exclaims: „But Jacqueline, you are naïve!“ She has a point, of course. We only need to open our newspapers to encounter gruesome cruelties performed by human beings. It is just as easy to dig up horrors from history. My perspective was, however, based on the analysis of narratives about human sacrifice. This motif has been used in history as an instrument to create scapegoats and persecute religious, ethnic, or other groups. We all know that strange stories about early Christians, Jews and so-called witches slaughtering infants for peculiar purposes have led to bloodshed and killings of those accused of this type of human sacrifice.

The intersection of the fantastic and reality is one among many interests that Tatyana and I share. For this contribution, I will return to a cluster of dangerous ladies from mythology: Lilith – Lamia – Allecto – the Morrígan. When Michael Clarke gave a splendid paper at the Tionól about the last three females (Clarke 2014), one element struck me especially: that Allecto was called ‘unstoppable,

unceasing, incessant' (*impausabilis*), which seemed to point at a parallel between this Fury and Lilith, who is known to be restless. I never explored this further but will now take the opportunity to return to this characteristic. As usual, the matter is rather complicated and we miss pieces of the puzzle. I will nevertheless describe my lines of investigation, which due to present personal circumstances are doomed to be preliminary and somewhat random.

Lilith, Lamia, and the Morrígan have become a cluster thanks to a gloss ascribed to John Scottus Eriugena (ninth century), in which the Morrígan is identified with Lamia: *Lamia monstrum in feminae figura .i. morigain*, 'Lamia: a monster in the form of a woman, that is: a morrigan'. The context is a vision of destruction in the Book of Isaiah that gives the only biblical reference to Lilith: *ibi cubavit lamia et invenit sibi requiem* (Is 34:14), 'Lamia has lain down there and she finds rest for herself'. In his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, Jerome (ca. 347–420) replaced Hebrew Lilith (the proper and the sort name of a Semitic female demon) with a similar female being from Greek/Roman mythology: Lamia (possibly deriving from Akkadian *Lamashtu*;¹ Hutter 1999: 521). Tales tell how these horrifying supernatural women haunt humanity: their own children died or were killed, which is why they now murder babies and women in childbed out of revenge. They lacerate men whom they first seduce. Like Lamia, Lilith is a destructive, restless supernatural female, and this is the point of her inclusion in Isaiah's prophecy: she is always on the go but it will be in a place of utter destruction that she will finally find rest, among hordes of demons, monsters and wild creatures. Lilith, a long-haired woman with wings, has also been identified with the demon-kind 'terror of the night' (mentioned in Psalm 90:5 and in plural in the Song of Songs 3:8). In the poem *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*, the Irish equivalent of 'nocturnal terror' – *aidche úath* – may refer to the Morrígan as a threatening presence among the bloody corpses on the battle field. There is yet another frightening female who may be added to the cluster. The Morrígan is also equated with a Fury in line 955 in Recension I of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 'The Cattle Raid of Cúailnge', in which Allecto (Allechtu), that is: the Morrígan, prophesies about battle and slaughter, perched on a pillar-stone in bird form.

¹ Alternatively, lamia is explained as deriving from the same root as Greek terms for 'gullet', and is thus translated as 'she who swallows down' (Johnston 1995: 380; Egeler 2008–2009: 166).

The bird form, the association with battle, war and death, and the talent for shape-shifting are general points of resemblance between Furies and Irish supernatural women, like the Morrígan and Badb, but especially between Allecto and the Morrígan there are striking parallels. Finally, a link between Furies and Lilith/Lamia is supplied by Jerome when he tells us that some Jews identify the latter with the former (for details and further literature, see Borsje 1999, 2007).

Thus we may summarize the previous research. We will now turn to *impausabilis*, ‘unstoppable, unceasing, incessant’, the word that seemed to present a parallel between Lilith/Lamia and Allecto, for an unstoppable Fury may be compared with a restless, slaughtering supernatural woman. The first quote in Clarke’s article, however, describes all three Furies as ‘unstoppable’. Clarke draws our attention to *Ratio fabularum*, ‘The System/Explanation of Myths’, a mythographic text compiled at Laon in the early ninth century under the direction of the Irish scholar Martinus Hiberniensis, and largely derived from the North-African Fulgentius (fl. late 5th – early 6th century) and other Late-Antique authorities, which reads:

ISTAE SUNT tres furiae. Allecto. Tisiphone. Megera. Impausibiles enim interpretantur istae & semper furendo trahere dicuntur animas in infernum.

THESE ARE the three Furies: Allecto, Tisiphone, Megera. These ones are interpreted as ‘unstoppable’ and always by means of madness [? or ‘by always stealing’] these ones are said to drag souls into Hell (Clarke 2014: 112).

This passage seems to etymologize *furia*, ‘fury, violent passion, rage, madness; a Fury’, with both *furo*, ‘to be out of one’s mind, to be mad, furious’, and *furor*, ‘to steal, purloin, pilfer’, and connects this with being *impausabilis*, ‘unceasing, incessant’, which last element at first sight seems to fall outside the etymological play, but not on closer inspection. Without a pause, Furies frantically transport human souls to the Underworld, which may refer to Furies either killing people or serving as demons driving souls to Hell. The plural form of *impausabilis* is, however, unusual. A Google search (on 6 January 2016) resulted only in the quote above from Clarke’s article. More common is the connection of *impausabilis* with the name A(l)lecto, and Fulgentius explains here why:

Huic quoque etiam tres Furias deseruire dicunt; quarum prima Allecto secunda Tisiphone, tertia Megera; Allecto enim Grece **impausabilis** dicitur; Tisiphone autem quasi tuton phone, id est istarum vox;

Megera autem quasi megale eris, id est magna contentio. Primum est ergo non pausando furiam concipere, secundum est in uoce erumpere, tertium iurgium protelare (Fulgentius Mythographus, *Mitologiarum libri tres* (CPL 0849, LLA 710) - LLT-A lib. 1, cap. 7, pag. 20, linea 20; exported on 6 January 2016 from the Cross Database Searchtool of Brepols Publishers).²

The Greek word *Allecto* means ‘incessant’ (ἄ-λληκτος). Eriugena may have known this; he was, moreover, familiar with work by Fulgentius (Clarke 2014: 110-111). *Allecto*, however, is not part of the equation in the gloss on Isaiah and this particular connection with *Lilith/Lamia* suddenly seems rather weak, but it also makes me return to Eriugena’s gloss.

Why on earth did Eriugena associate the *Morrígan* with a child-murderer and sexually active slayer of men, like *Lilith* and *Lamia*, if we leave Jerome’s explanation *Lilith=Lamia=Fury* aside (cf. Egeler 2008–2009: 137-42)? Was it on the basis of the ability to change shape, as I assumed in 1999? All four female mythological figures have individual characteristics but also share several traits, such as their bird appearance,³ their female form, their connection with slaughter and sex, and they occur as a single woman with a proper name and as a collective in a plural form. The *Morrígan* sexually approaches the hero *Cú Chulainn* ‘in the form of a woman’ in the *Táin*, but there is no *Lilith/Lamia*-like ending of the episode because of *Cú Chulainn*’s refusal to make love with her. If this motif from the traditions about the *Morrígan* was on Eriugena’s mind, then it should be noted that the encounter between bird/woman and warrior has a much closer parallel with the meetings between *Allecto* and *Turnus* (Borsje 1999: 240, 245-47; cf. Corthals 1996). In order to understand Eriugena’s association, we need to look at the broader context of *Lilith/Lamia* in Isaiah 34. Jerome’s version counts more mythological beings than the Hebrew ground text, but all the same we get a strong visual image. All nations (*gentes*) should approach; the whole earth should listen (Is 34:1), for God’s indignation and fury (*furor*) have descended upon the nations and their armies; they are killed and slaughtered (2). Everywhere are corpses and carcasses; stench and blood fill the land (3). God’s sword is filled with blood; slaughter and judgement

² Cf. Clarke 2014: 119, 121, but here the vital link with the Greek language is not made explicit in *Allecto*’s case.

³ For *Lamia* or *lamiai/lamiae* as (nocturnal) birds (of prey), see Johnston 1995: 174-75, who adds: “Child-killing demons are associated with birds of prey – and particularly with nocturnal raptors such as the owl – not only in other areas of the Mediterranean basin but in many other parts of the world as well”. Cf. Egeler 2008–2009: 266.

will/has come down on Bosra and Edom (5-6). The earth gets soaked with blood from lambs, he-goats, rams, unicorns and bulls (6-7) on this day of God's vengeance (8). The ground is full of fiery pitch and brimstone, smoking day and night (9-10). The desolate wasteland will be inhabited by the bittern and hedgehog, the ibis and raven, dragons and ostriches, while the houses and fortresses are overgrown with thorns, nettles and thistles (11-13). Demons and ass-centaurs will meet there; hairy creatures/goat-demons/satyrs cry out to each other and Lamia/Lilith lies down, finally resting (14). Hedgehogs and kites dwell there (15). This is all according to the plan of God (16-17). The association between Lilith/Lamia with the Morrigan is understandable on the basis of this desolate scene, full of corpses and blood, wild and demonic creatures. This landscape parallels Irish battle-field descriptions, in which not only 'monsters in the form of a woman' but also supernatural females, such as the Morrigan, in bird form can be found.

The question of what was known in European medieval cultures about beings like Lilith and Lamia remains pressing. How much exchange was there between Christians and Jews? This needs to be further investigated in temporal and spatial contexts. While we make our diachronic reconstructions and analyses, we remain aware of the fragmentary nature of our evidence. We miss pieces of various puzzles, because only some texts reflect the rich traditions of oral culture, and many texts have gone lost. We may find clues in amulets and spells for protection from these dread-inspiring women, and narratives may reflect popular customs of scaring children into obedience. At first sight, an entry in the fifth- or sixth-century *First Synod of St Patrick* seems to be an isolated piece in an Irish puzzle: belief in a *lamia* is forbidden and accusing someone of being a *lamia*, explained as *striga*, will be punished (Bieler 1963: 56 §16). Lamia was thus not only a supernatural woman; human beings could also be called by this name/word. Significantly, both Lilith (the first wife of Adam) and Lamia started their biography as human women, just as destructive female ghosts who previously died an untimely death and now deprive others of what they missed (Trachtenberg 1939: 36-37; Johnston 1999: 164-65). The *strix* or *striga* is a similar flying, nocturnal, destructive creature; *striga*, 'hag, witch, woman that brings harm to children', is related to *strix*, 'a screech-owl, which according to the belief of the ancients sucked the blood of young children'. The image of women slaughtering

babies and appearing in various forms including birds was part of the concept of witchcraft in Semitic, Greek and Roman cultures; the image was known in other parts of Europe too. In the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636), which were so popular in Ireland, *lamia* is explained from *laniare*, ‘to tear apart, lacerate’ and connected with tales about *lamiae* who snatch children and tear them apart (VIII.102), and *strigae* are said to be transformed humans who can take on various shapes by using spells or poisonous herbs in order to do crimes (XI.4.2).⁴ The entry in *First Synod of St Patrick* is part of a larger complex, and its composers may perhaps be compared with Plato who did not believe in such creatures, exiling them to the context of poets, (old) women and children (Johnston 1999: 168-69). With the human dimension of the image of a dangerous, bloodthirsty female, we have returned to our beginning: the crossover between the fantastic and real life, horror stories, false accusations and human beings sometimes doing disgusting, cruel things. Another of Tatyana’s favourite topics – vampires – appeared to be part of the picture as well.⁵

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- M. Hutter 1939: *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*. New York: Behrman’s Jewish Book House.

⁴ I thank Michael Clarke for drawing my attention to striga in Isidore.

⁵ I am grateful to Michael Clarke for his comments upon an earlier version of this piece.