

Haxan, Hag, Hawthorn, Hex

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The witch comes in her winding sheet, her shroud.

Her fingertips are stained azalea-purple: the colour of mourning. The soil is running with dark juices, there is dirt on the hem of her gold party dress.

She is ready to lie down.

Haga, the witch learns, means enclosure, a portion of woodland marked off for cutting. *Haga* becomes *hawthorn*, *quickthorn*, *thorn-apple*, *May-Tree*, *hawberry*: a supernatural portal, where the hag straddles the boundary of both worlds, is a hedge-rider or a witch or a ghost. She is a *hægtesse*: a woman of prophecy. Oracle.

Kenneth Calhoun reminds us that the etymology of the term 'witch' comes from the same root as 'hedge'. Etymologically speaking, the witch is inherently part of the landscape. The Witch is inseparable from the landscape she haunts, and, in fact, appears to haunt *as* the landscape, rather than *through* the landscape:

Her reputation as witch stems from a knowledge of the magical properties of plants, by which she is able, so it is rumored, to make herself invisible. Yet her witch-like status is also a function of an emblematic geography that links this "local knowledge" with knowledge of the locale. Her garden-and vantage point, and her repeated placement at openings in the hedge ("Heckentfir," 118) and fence ("Zaunstelle," 119) elaborates the etymology of "Hexe" (witch), which is derived from "Hecke" (hedge). The similarity between the English "hag" and German "Hag" (also hedge) denotes the same history. Hans Peter Duerr describes the traditional witch- the hagazussa or fence-sitter-in terms of a once-accepted social function, namely that of making visible the boundary separating society from the wilderness and alerting those on the inside to their own potential for chaos.

Feudalism thrives on pink and red blossoms, on hawthorn and rhododendron. Mass farming of common hawthorn was used to create field boundaries for the Inclosure Acts.

The big houses, for absent landlords, were planted with hedges, *haga*, hawthorn, to form enclosures. Quick cover for hunting was formed by rhododendron bushes, where wild animals, unused to the rapid invasion of this canopy of shadowy branches, stifling blossoms, murky undergrowth, were shot in the hundreds.

The rhododendron, stolen from colonial devastations, has no natural predator in the acidic soil of the rainy west coast.

Hedges, like lawns, are of no use to the witch unless they are overgrown, wild, and generative. She likes to feel overwhelmed, to feel powerless in the presence of unruly vegetation. Hawthorn is a native of this island and to cut its branches is a death sentence, to violate it is to incite supernatural wrath.

Her mother wanted to call her Medea, after the witch, but her father was spooked by the association with the Greek myth. She had been the eldest, their first. She had been their object of indulgence and affection, and joy. They made a compromise with Maedbh, still a mythical goddess, but a more appropriate figure. A wife, a mother, and martyr as well as a warrior queen. But her mother knew that Maedbh's name also meant intoxicating one: specialist in poisons, herbs, and drugs from mead: a fermented honey drink, used as an aphrodisiac and symbolic of sexual love in wedding ceremonies. A period of intoxication followed the wedding, in the month of mead or the *honey moon*.

The psychoactive mixture of rhododendron pollen and honey creates euphoria—the body's palliative response to toxic shock, a softening of the edges of reality as death creeps into major organs, causing irregular heartbeat, low blood pressure, nausea, fatal coma.

The rhododendron plant is one of the earliest recorded biological weapons. In 63 BC, Roman soldiers were tricked into eating mad honey—a deadly mistake.

There is a ballad about an expectant mother who drinks nothing but rhododendron tea for her final trimester and gives birth to a forest.

She will become *haga*, *haxan*, hag, hawthorn, hedge-rider, honey eater, martyr, priestess, bringer of death.