

Sabiha Gökçen Airport in Istanbul is small compared to the new airport on the European side of the city. There is never a free place to sit, an outlet to charge a phone, or a fountain to refill a bottle. Named after the first female fighter pilot, it is one of 16 airports in the world named after a woman. Of those, only three of those names belong to aviators, or aviatrixes: Amelia Earhart Memorial Airport, Aitchison, USA; Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport, Thermal, USA; and Sabiha Gökçen International Airport, Istanbul, Turkey.¹

As one of Atatürk's adopted children, Sabiha Gökçen had access to education and the opportunity to choose to become a pilot. While attending Tayyare Mektebi (Aviation School) in Eskişehir, she received special training in a plane that had been modelled to fit her size. Sabiha was the symbol of the modern Turkish woman. And to be the world's first female military pilot,² to be of Turkish descent, and additionally to be one of Atatürk's adopted daughters, made her life story a source of national pride.³ Having landed and flown from Sabiha Gökçen Airport multiple times in the last year, I wanted to be proud of Sabiha, too. I wanted to celebrate and admire her for achieving what no woman had achieved before her, despite all obstacles, gender stereotypes, and glass ceilings. I wanted her to be the hero for women's rights she is portrayed as, and I wanted her to join the ranks of all the other women who achieved, first, what they were perfectly capable of—even specifically gifted to do—despite the obstacles and social restrictions thrown in their paths.

Sabiha was the symbol of a new Turkish society: modern, open to the world, offering equal opportunities to women. When I mentioned my interest in her story to a friend in Istanbul, it was immediately met with slight resentment. Not only was she a flying woman, but also the only woman to take part in military operations during the Dersim rebellion, making her the first Turkish female air force combat pilot. During this military operation, numerous bombs were dropped on the Kurdish people in the Dersim region rising up against the government. Despite her role in paving the way for Turkish women in aviation, she took part in popularising oppression and violence against Kurdish people. Even though I want to celebrate her and the other women mentioned in this piece for their achievements and talents, I also wonder: why is it special when women fly?

The list of women aviators and their achievements on Wikipedia is long: Leman Altınçekiç, first female accredited jet pilot in Türkiye and NATO; Tamar Ariel, Israel's first Jewish female religiously observant air force pilot; Asli Hassan Abade, first African female fighter jet pilot; Jean Batten, first solo flight from United Kingdom to New Zealand; Amelie Beese, first woman pilot in Germany; Willa Brown, first black woman to hold both a commercial and private

licence in the USA; Mary Calcaño, first Venezuelan woman to be granted a pilot's licence; Pearl Laska Chamberlain, first woman to solo a single-engine airplane up the Alaska Highway; Jerrie Cobb, first woman to fly in the Paris Air Show and to be tested as an astronaut; Hélène Dutrieu, first woman pilot in Belgium and to carry a passenger (who caused a sensation by flying without a corset); Amelia Earhart, first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic; Lotfia Elnadi, first Egyptian woman to earn her pilot licence; Rose Lok, first female Chinese-American pilot in New England; Ruth Law Oliver, first woman pilot to wear a military uniform and the first to deliver air mail to the Philippines; Ingrid Pedersen, first woman to fly over the North Pole; Vera Zakharova, first Yakut woman pilot.⁴ This is just a fraction of the aforementioned list. There is no such list for male aviators; there is a list of aviation pioneers.

In folktales, mythologies, legends, religious, and pagan belief systems, flying women—witches, fairies, harpies, swan maidens, goddesses like Hekate, Diana, Nike, etc.—are uncanny, unchained, sexual, uncontrollable, loose, fierce, savage, sometimes willful, always untamed creatures, often possessing the ability to shapeshift. Lilith, the primordial she-demon in Judaic and Mesopotamian mythology, borrows the shape of an owl, or even disease-bearing wind. As the archetypal (sexually) untamed women, she is the flying nightmare of millennia-old patriarchal societies. In Jewish mythology, Lilith is the first wife of Adam. But unlike Eve, she was made simultaneously with Adam and therefore is his equal. She is the first unruly woman—breaking free from domestic restriction—and therefore the first monstrous-feminine.⁵

Greek and Roman mythology imagines harpies as winged female creatures, alternately described as beautiful maidens with wings, bare breasts, and sharp bird-like claws, or terrible flying monsters with ugly faces pale with hunger, equally bare breasts and predatory claws and wings ready to steal children from the face of the earth. In Edvard Munch's drawings titled *Harpyie*, dark-haired flying bird-women with almost angelic wings but seemingly razor-sharp claws are shown plummeting to the ground ready to swoop up a skeletal half-dead figure.⁶ These images evoke similarities to vultures but with serenely calm facial expressions, perhaps even carrying their prey to heavenly salvation. Nevertheless, malicious flying witches and harpies alike are a product of patriarchal fantasy and fear of losing control and superiority. Equally, witches and harpies are somewhat sexually charged figures. The medieval idea of a witch is a lecherous, unchaste woman who engages in sexual acts with the devil.⁷ This licentiousness speaks to the misogynist's worst fear: unruly women living free of restriction.

In mediaeval Europe, ideas about Lilith and classical-world flying monstrous-females, such as Harpies, Circe, and Medea, began to mix with European folk stories and the relatively new Christian church still trying to replace Paganism. The European witches

1) *Fairports*, <https://www.netflights.com/c/airport-hub/airports/fairports/>, last accessed April 17, 2023.

2) Here it is important to note that in fact the French pilot Marie Marvingt was the first female pilot in combat. She flew medic flights during WWI and served in the military disguised as a man, *Viewpoint: Why are so few WW1 heroines remembered?*, BBC News, October 27, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29706831>, last accessed April 17, 2023.

3) "You have made me very happy... Now I can announce what I have planned for you... Perhaps you will be the first female military pilot in the world... You can imagine how proud it would be for a Turkish girl to be the first female military pilot in the world, can't you? I'm going to take immediate action and send you to the Aeroplane School in Eskişehir, where you will receive special training." (Mustafa Kemal Atatürk), <https://web.archive.org/web/20141006181638/http://www.hvkk.tsk.tr/tr/IcerikDetay.aspx?ID=34&IcerikID=86>, last accessed April 17, 2023.

4) *List of women aviators*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_women_aviators, last accessed April 17, 2023.

5) Serenity Young, *Women Who Fly*, Oxford University Press, New York 2018, p. 158.

6) Edvard Munch, *Harpyie*, 1899, Lithograph, Munch Museet Oslo.

7) Kristen J. Solleé, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley 2017, p. 23.

moved outside the rule of men over women and God over men, and thus were scapegoated for everything inexplicable and mysterious which, at a time without any significant medical treatment outside of bloodletting and herbal brews, was a lot. Most frequently accused of witchcraft were unmarried women living in rural areas outside of any domestic context, midwives, practitioners of pagan rituals and women with knowledge in herbalism. In the dualistic system in which the Christian church classified all of society—everything inside the clerical framework equals good and everything outside of it equals bad aka the devil—these unruly women had no space within the church. The publication *Der Hexenhammer (malleus maleficarum)* written by Heinrich Kramer elucidates the misogyny that eventually led to witch persecution, particularly in Germany and other Christian parts of Europe.⁸ According to the self-proclaimed witch hunters, European witches used domestic items—cauldrons to boil and eat babies and broomsticks or pitchforks to fly and engage in orgies with the devil—to practise witchcraft. Witches were commonly thought to manufacture a sort of flying ointment out of any number of things, including the scraps at the bottom of a cauldron from above mentioned infant soup. This ointment could be directly spread on the naked body, or on an animal, such as a goat, or on objects, like a broomstick. The ability to fly was especially significant as it enabled witches to break free from social conventions and domestic life. Witches flew to freedom and out of the control of overbearing husbands, brothers, fathers, or neighbours.

The actual ability to pilot a plane—to fly—still holds a powerful symbolism of freedom for many women. Another unruly woman in that sense is Niloofar Rahmani, Afghanistan’s first Air Force pilot. According to her autobiography *Open Skies*, even as a child she expressed the wish to become a pilot, when, during a walk with her father, she observed a commercial plane fly overhead. At the time, this seemed like a practically impossible path for a woman in Afghanistan. Later, during the brief period of relative freedom for Afghan women after the Taliban regime was forced out in 2001, she was able to attend school, university, and, in spite of resistance from almost all sides, became Afghanistan’s first fixed-wing pilot.⁹ Joining the military was the only way for Niloofar to fulfil her wish of becoming a pilot. After completing pilot training, she completed cargo flight and transported injured soldiers. Despite successfully completing pilot training, becoming an officer in the Afghan Air Force, and working for years in the Afghan military, some of her male colleagues failed to accept her as equal, and she and her family also received threats.¹⁰ A woman who wears a uniform, a woman who fights for her rights, a woman in charge is something many men in contemporary Afghanistan—especially the younger men who grew up under Taliban rule—are still not used to.¹¹ A woman who defies her supposed domestic role and becomes a pilot presents an uncanny threat to the patriarchal rule. The growing anger Niloofar and her family were constantly confronted with finally led to her and her family fleeing Afghanistan.

Patriarchal societies operate on a double standard when it comes to things like the ability to fly or practise magic. Even before the big wave of witch hunts, from 1400 on, there were plenty of male ritualistic magicians who deliberately evoked demons and controlled them. But with the massive losses in population, quality of life, and security after the prior outbreak of the Plague, the climate of despair gave way to the above-mentioned dualistic world view split between good—the Catholic Church—and evil—the devil, or everything outside of the clerical frame.¹² This blend of distress, hardship, and bigotry was just right for the rise of the malicious witch. Those accused of witchcraft were for the most part female and were believed to be possessed or under the control of demons.¹³ Daedalus, who in the Greek legend builds wings for himself and his son Icarus allowing them to fly, is described as a skilled craftsman. Therefore the flight, despite it ending in Icarus’ death and becoming a metaphor for human hubris, is perceived as a result of competence, not an alliance with the devil or some other evil force. By that logic, the European witches who were said to have been brewing flying ointment and applying it to simple household items like broomsticks in order to enable them to fly, could have equally been perceived as competent and skilled instead of in a pact with the devil.

Generally, male-coded mythological figures such as Pegasus, Cupid, or the Centaur are connoted with rather positive virtues such as courage, romance, and strength, whereas Harpies, sphinx, or witches have something uneasy and malevolent about them. Whenever female figures are airborne, they are unpredictable, ungovernable, and often badly intentioned. Therefore, when women fly it is uncanny, dubious and menacing; when men fly it is gracious, dignified, and awe-inspiring.



The history of human aviation in the last 150 years or so has been male-dominated. Female pilots are the exception, and were previously often referred to as *aviatrix*, in distinction to the male form, *aviator*. Women in aviation were also frequently called condescending nicknames such as *ladybirds*, *angels*, or *sweet-hearts of the air*, and were almost always referred to as girls rather than women.¹⁴ (The evolution from old hags to girls is hardly a sign of progress in this fight for equality.) Equally frequent was the blame put on technical difficulties when a male pilot crashed, while a woman crashing her plane was proof that women simply were not cut out to fly.¹⁵ During her pilot training, Niloofar felt the pressure of representing not just herself but all Afghan women. Any mistake on her part would not be seen as a personal failure but as testimony for all Afghan women’s ineptitude.¹⁶

To this day, flying women, now simply known as pilots, are not the norm. However, since the invention of mechanical flying devices, witchcraft could, with almost total certainty, be ruled out as an aid in female flight. So, what is it now that is perceived as uncomfortable about flying females? This contemporary discomfort about female flight is a symptom of the slowly crumbling patriarchally organised society whose dust is being whirled up in the wings of unruly women like Niloofar Rahmani.

So, was Sabiha Gökçen an unruly woman? As a child she demanded to be educated beyond the level considered appropriate for women at the time. She voiced this wish with confidence when Atatürk visited her hometown, and she was subsequently adopted by him. This secured her path in higher education and later, a career in aviation.¹⁷ Despite being an advocate for women’s equality and smoothing the path for Turkish women in aviation, she was also very much part of a politically motivated plan and served as an instrument to showcase Turkey as a progressive nation.

Women as commercial pilots today are indeed a familiar occurrence but are still underrepresented in this area; the global average for women pilots is 5.8% with India’s national average at the top with 12.4%.¹⁸ I am also looking towards Christina Koch, the only woman on the Artemis mission to land on the moon in 2024.¹⁹ Space travel lends an additional meaning to the term *flying*, but it is equally vital to insist on equal opportunities for all genders in this area too.

Being unruly means instigating change and progress, and insisting on emancipation and (r)evolution. In that sense, this is an encouragement to be unruly: a witch, a harpy, Niloofar, Circe, Lilith, an aviatrix, even a fairy or a ladybird. These labels speak of the fear towards, and power within the symbol of liberated, uncontrolled (airborne) women. To proudly be such a woman means reaping the fruits of the labour and suffering of generations of feminists, witches, and unruly women before us.

In parts of the world influenced by the West, witches have been popularised by countless books, movies, and TV series. The term *witch* is an example of a formerly derogatory term for women—along with its canine cousin—that is being reappropriated and turned into something powerful, desirable, and representative of self-determination by (Western) women.²⁰ Likewise, mythical creatures such as fairies can be seen in positively connoted roles. In the neo-noir, steampunk series *Carnival Row*, the character Vignette Stonemoss is courageous, savvy, vigorous, and she is part of the airborne faes. She is headstrong, a fighter and a leader, definitely a threat to the oppressive system, and an unruly woman. Personally, I would happily refer to myself as a witch. Admittedly, I get a queasy feeling whenever I am on a plane leaving the Earth’s surface. Maybe that would be different on a pitchfork or backwards on a goat—they seem like more reliable means of flying to me.

Flight symbolises freedom of movement and consequently freedom in a broader sense. In this vein, I see women in aviation not as a side note of the general history of aviation but participants in a broader fight for equality. Accomplishments achieved by women in flight are landmarks on the pathway to a future where everyone can move and live their life however they wish.

8) The thoughts expressed in *Der Hexenhammer* are neither new nor obsolete. One example in contemporary media is convicted rapist and human trafficker Andrew Tate, who expressed similarly misogynistic ideas to millions of followers via his social media channels until these accounts were banned in 2022 by platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook.
9) Before the Taliban rule there were female helicopter pilots in Afghanistan: Latifa and Laliuma Nabizada. *Latifa Nabizada – Afghanistan’s first woman of the skies*, BBC News, June 19, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22943454>, last accessed April 18, 2023.
10) *First female Afghan Air Force pilot speaks out about her experience in the military*, CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2021/07/23/first-female-air-force-pilot-afghanistan-acfc-full-episode-vpx.cnn>, last accessed April 18, 2023.
11) Niloofar Rahmani with Adam Sikes, *Open Skies: My life as Afghanistan’s first female pilot*, Chicago Review Press, Chicago 2021, p. 199.
12) Kristen J. Solleé, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley 2017, p. 22.
13) Serenity Young, *Women Who Fly*, Oxford University Press, New York 2018, p. 166.
14) ivi, p. 233.
15) ibid.
16) Niloofar Rahmani with Adam Sikes, *Open Skies: My life as Afghanistan’s first female pilot*, Chicago Review Press, Chicago 2021, p. 170f.

17) Melahat Simsek, *Geburtstag von Sabiha Gökçen, türkische Fliegerin und erste Kampfpilotin der Welt*, SR2 Radio, March 21, 2023, https://www.sr.de/sr/sr2/sendungen_a-z/uebersicht/zeitzeichen/20230321_sabiha_goekcen_sendung_100.html, last accessed April 18, 2023.
18) René Bocksch, *Frauen sitzen nur selten im Cockpit*, Statista, August 11, 2022, <https://de.statista.com/infografik/27970/frauenanteil-unter-pilotinnen-in-der-kommerziellen-luftfahrt/>, last accessed April 18, 2023.
19) Patrick Klapetz, *Diese vier Artemis-Astronauten fliegen 2024 zum Mond*, mdr Wissen, April 4, 2023, <https://www.mdr.de/wissen/raumfahrt-das-sind-die-vier-artemis-mond-astronauten-100.html>, last accessed April 18, 2023.
20) Kristen J. Solleé, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley 2017, p. 13.

