Witchy Woman
Throughout history, cautionary tales of witchcraft have been used to oppress and subjugate women. However, the notions surrounding witchcraft have radically evolved since the fluctuating witch craze in Europe and America’s own Salem witch trials. Today, the witch has become a modernized motif for feminism. Now a symbol of female power in the media, witchcraft has been reclaimed from its pejoration thanks to the popular culture of the past century.

Prior centuries, however, were less than kind. In what is now the United States, an inherited distrust of the occult—typically composed of astrology, alchemy, and natural magic—was perpetuated in the colonies during the late seventeenth century. In Europe, the mass hysteria surrounding the witch crazes was on a “far more enormous scale [than what] occurred repeatedly in the Middle Ages,” and, like the Salem witch trials, occurred “in the wake of stress and social disorganization, after wars or after an epidemic of the Black Death.” Repeatedly, Europe experienced outbreaks of accusation and agitation regarding witchcraft; moreover, notions of demonic possession were regularly revived.

This inheritance of antipathy and skepticism, as achieved by historical precedent, helped lay the foundation for a full-blown witch hunt in the small village of Salem. Between limited resources, squalid living conditions, family rivalries, and extremely strict religious practices, these Puritans began to relegate the blame for their immense difficulties to Satan and Satan-worshippers.

Witches could be blamed for a good deal of trouble and difficulty. In this respect the belief in witchcraft was very useful indeed. To discover an unseen hand at work in one’s life was to dispel mystery, to explain misfortune, and to excuse incompetence. (Demos 304)

With the various misfortunes and other calamitous goings-on, it was obvious to village authorities that “the devil was at work in Salem Village, and since even the devil cannot produce results on this scale without human accomplices, it was equally plain that he had commissioned witches.” With this presumption in hand, more than two hundred individuals were tried, twenty witches—fourteen of which were women—were executed, and all blame for the feverish frenzy of the trials was placed on the trickery of the devil.

Unsurprisingly, “only about 20 percent of accused witches were male, and most of them were considered guilty simply because of their association with suspected witches
who were women.” Given that men were certainly among the accused, the convicted, and the executed, it is easy to ascertain that “witchcraft was not sex-specific.” However, given the ratio of the accused, it is also apparent that “it was sex-related.” Historically, women have been the primary targets for accusations of witchcraft, particularly because as disempowered women “witchcraft [was] regarded as [woman’s] strongest weapon.” Even in the aftermath of the Salem witch trials, “New Englanders continued to target the same kind of person as a witch: an elderly, reclusive woman.”

In particular, traditional healers were under extensive scrutiny. Due to emerging scientific theory, the medical field was rapidly progressing, and suddenly there was no room for women healers. In fact, the modern stereotype of the witch began to take shape in this burgeoning, enlightened society of the eighteenth century: the “witch” of the Salem witch trials was reduced to “the image of a powerful, eccentric woman who did the work of Satan,” or an “ugly, toothless hag”; the witch in America became a laughable, useless old woman who was “socially isolated and even mentally weak.”

Rather than remedying the vilifying claims of the Salem witch trials, society instead proceeded to reduce the sphere of influence for women labeled as witches. The effects of this curtailment were indiscriminate, however, and the rampant stigmatization and patronizing rebranding of the witch was extended to include the “potential witch,” which exists within every woman as feminine power. Rather than possessing the traditional potentiality as a mystifying threat to the patriarchal governance of society, women became increasingly marginalized within the Enlightenment movement and the consequential shift of emphasis to rational thought and scientific fact rather than more spiritual, theological, and mythic truths. So, although this amendment to societal perceptions protected women “from the superstitions that had made them victims” to traditional “accusations of witchcraft,” women became increasingly disempowered in this new society.

In 1893, prominent American suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage wrote Woman, Church and State, which reframed the European witch hunts as a misogynistic attempt by the church and state to police women’s bodies.

The teaching of the church, as to the creation of women and the origin of evil, embodied the ordinary belief of the Christian peoples, and that woman rather than man practiced this sin [witchcraft], was attributed by the church to her original sinful nature, which led her to disobey God’s first command in Eden.

Thus, women who “unrighteously” exerted the feminine power associated with original sin—or any power, for that matter—were condemned as witches and enemies to the state. For instance, when reading Cotton Mather’s writings of the Salem witch trials a simple substitution of “witch” for “woman” allows a fuller comprehension “of the cruelties inflicted by the church upon this portion of humanity.”

Now, by these confessions ‘tis agreed that the devil has made a dreadful knot of [women] in the country, and by the help of [women] has dreadfully increased that knot: that these [women] have driven a trade of commissioning their confederate spirits to do all sorts of mischiefs to the neighbors, whereupon there have ensured such mischievous consequences accounted for: yea, that at prodigious [women]-meetings, the wretches have proceeded so far as to concert and consult the methods of rooting out the Christian religion from this country, and setting up instead of it perhaps a more gross diabolism than ever the world saw before. (323)
This exploration of dysphemism (substituting a neutral expression for something more disparaging and polarizing) as encouraged by Matilda Gage reveals the idea that women, as witches, were seeking to dismantle the patriarchal imprisonment of the Catholic Church. In doing so, however, women were relegated to that of devil worshippers. Mather’s writings also reveal the inherent distrust in women as an opposing force to the Church and the society structure it perpetuated. Given the theologized female inheritance of original sin, the patriarchal belief is that it must only be natural for women to collude with the devil in order to gain empowerment. However, with the substitution of “woman” for “witch,” this ideology becomes glaringly disillusioned.

This revelatory reframing of the plight of women in regard to accusations of witchcraft lends itself to another purpose: as exhibited within Gage’s writings, it is arguably the first time that the term “witch” had been corrected and used in a positive way; rather than continued utilization as a term to vilify women and women’s empowerment, there definition of witchcraft created a new lens in which to observe the plight of feminism throughout history. It also provided a framework for the reappropriation of witchcraft and later representations of witches.

Interestingly, Gage’s writings influenced more than the incredible women steeped in suffrage movements and feminist literature. L. Frank Baum, the son-in-law of Gage, channeled Gage’s feminist politics and incorporated refashioned notions of witchery into his book The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. In Baum’s book, published in 1900, just seven years after Gage published Woman, Church and State, he deviates from cultural precedence and introduces a new kind of witch. Witches, as imagined by Baum, were given a complexity of character; witches were no longer confined to a singular trope. However, the dynamic complexity of the witch was split into a polarity of good versus evil: the “good” witch embodied the entirety of purity and generosity, and the “bad” witch embodied the aggregate of ill will and nefariousness.

When adapted into a film by MGM Studios, The Wizard of Oz set the stage for how witches would continue to be imagined in media and entertainment. The polarity created by Baum was further enunciated in the portrayals of the witches—Glinda the Good Witch was bedecked in a bubblegum-pink ballgown of froufrou flair and brandished a sort of fairy wand, while the Wicked Witch of the West was a green-skinned, warty hag with a pointy black hat and a flying broom. Indeed, The Wizard of Oz paved the way for films such as “I Married A Witch,” released in 1942, and “Bell, Book, and Candle,” released in 1958. Just like Glinda the Good Witch, these portrayed witches are exceptionally beautiful, appealingly charming, and typically rather blonde. Popular cinematic portrayals of witches began to thwart the traditional image of the “ugly, toothless hag” conjured after the witch hysteria of the late seventeenth century and perpetuated in the adaptation of The Wizard of Oz. Thanks to Hollywood, the witch was no longer a disempowered woman of ill repute; instead, she was glamorous, mysterious, and perhaps even a little bit dangerous.

But the most beloved example of the new age witch can be found in the then-trendy television series Bewitched, which gained popularity in the early 1960s and honed in on the plight of the middle-class housewife. Samantha is beautiful, utterly enchanting, and just so happens to be a witch. When she falls in love with a mortal man, Samantha endeavors to lead an ordinary life in suburbia. Throughout the show, however, various spells amid fluff and fun wreak havoc in the not-so-simple life of Samantha and her husband, Darrin. With the women’s liberation movement bubbling under the surface, it is especially apparent that
even the way Samantha uses magic is a nod to feminism—her husband is unable to access magic, and it’s something outside his realm of control. Thus, Samantha’s magical powers give her a sort of agency vastly unavailable to the typical suburban housewife of the 1960s.

For the real women confined within the role of housewife during the 1960s, discontentment and dissatisfaction were beginning to rise to the surface. In 1963, Betty Friedan published The Feminine Mystique, which is widely regarded as the spark that lit the flame for second-wave feminism in the United States. When Friedan surveyed former Smith College classmates as part of the fifteenth anniversary reunion, she found many of them were incredibly unhappy and isolated in their roles as housewives. This prompted Friedan’s research contained within The Feminine Mystique, and she began to interview other suburban housewives and conduct further research in the fields of psychology, media, and advertising. In the book that is largely regarded as the feminist manifesto, Friedan challenges the notion of singular feminine fulfillment through housewifery and motherhood.

The Feminine Mystique imparted a legacy: the book drew large numbers of white, middle-class women to the feminist cause; politicians began to partly recognize the frustrations of women and passed legislation for the Equal Pay Act of 1963 (Federal Employment and Labor Laws); and the National Organization for Women (NOW) was organized in 1966 by thirty women from various backgrounds. Naturally, Friedan was one of the thirty founding members, and she helped to draft the founding statement of NOW, which called for “the true equality for all women.”

A part of the feminist liberation movement of the 1960s was W.I.T.C.H., or the Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, which was the name of several independent (but related) feminist groups in the United States. Another expansion of the name was “Women Inspired to Tell their Collective History,” or even “Women Incensed at Telephone Company Harassment.” The various iterations of the acronym were not as important at the acronym itself, which enabled the groups to embrace the iconography of the witch. W.I.T.C.H. declared that any woman could become a witch simply by declaring herself as such (echoing a remark mentioned previously in this paper: “all women are potential witches”); moreover, any group of women could form a witches’ coven. In one of their leaflets, it is stated that,

If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a Witch. You make your own rules. You are free and beautiful. You can be invisible or evident in how you choose to make your witch-self known. You can form your own Coven of sister Witches (thirteen is a cozy number for a group) and do your own actions . . . You are a Witch by saying aloud, “I am a Witch” three times, and thinking about that. You are a Witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous, and immortal.

While perhaps a fringe phenomenon of the time, W.I.T.C.H.’s key assumptions concerning witchcraft in regard to women’s liberation paved the way for various forms of feminist-oriented modern paganism. With a contemporary resurgence of witchcraft and magic (some might even argue that witchery and magic in the form of astrology, divination, and herbalism is currently trendy), feminist activism has also reached this moment of revitalization. As witchcraft and feminism have met one another stride for stride, media has matched this complementary surge: in 2018, Netflix released a reboot of Sabrina, resurrecting the story of the teenage witch while weaving in political topics and feminist issues. In fact, some practicing witches would argue that feminism is just another word for witchcraft—after all, women and witches share a bond that begins with persecution and oppression.
The potions, spells, and rituals of modern witches stem from a long tradition of witchcraft. For centuries, magic has been a resource for feminine power and assistance. Today women across the country are dabbling in the same rituals and earth remedies (think crystals, herbs, and burning sage); magic, however, is not simply a means for self-preservation in the midst of a tumultuous political climate—women are harnessing magic and witchcraft as a political tool. As a means of resistance, these ancient traditions have been mobilized to rally against masculine hegemony and toxic patriarchal values. The movement is gaining ground and even has its own hashtag: #MagicResistance. Witches across the country have banded together to hex political figures like Brett Kavanaugh and collectively cast spells on President Trump. Whether or not the magic has much effect is up for debate, but, regardless, women across the country are uniting in a common cause.

Today, the label of “witch” is a political distinction speaking to the fundamentals of the feminist movement. A witch is a woman with power, and it’s no wonder the witch has been harnessed as a symbol for women seeking to upend systematic oppression—like a coven of witches, women across the country are banding together to fight the continued injustices of a patriarchal society. Similar to the previously explored notion of subjugating “divine feminine power” in patriarchal fear, one practicing witch iterated that witches are “what men like Donald Trump are afraid of”; in other words, a patriarchal society actively fears empowered women. In reclaiming the pejorative “witch,” the feminist movement iterates itself as a formidable force of divine feminine power ready to crush the patriarchy, and the movement is only just beginning.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


