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Self-Possessed

The Witch as a Symbol of the Empowered Woman

Throughout history, witches have been persecuted for their secrecy and failure to conform to societal expectations, but in recent times, this secrecy has been reclaimed as a tool for empowerment and subversion. The witch has been transformed from an archetype of female weakness and susceptibility to evil manipulation, to become a symbol of female strength, revolution, and connection with nature. Where witches were burned at the stake just over three centuries ago in Salem, modern witch societies practice magic and participate in social activist movements. Though the image of the witch has changed greatly, the witch's association with secrecy has persisted. The practice of witchcraft draws its power from secrecy itself, historically and contemporarily providing a form of resistance and subversion for oppressed peoples. Historically, the witch was a passive figure, defined by external expectations, but in modern times, the witch has been transformed into a subject with her own internal agency and strength, upending her former weaknesses into her unique advantages.

The persecution of witchcraft throughout Western history has often been an underlying persecution of women who did not conform to patriarchal societal norms. The witch is contradictorily both “a deeply gendered criminal profile and one of the few visions of female power inherited through Western history,”¹ She is a combination of “female divinity, female ferocity, and female transgression.”² Patriarchal society requires that women be quiet, passive, and submissive, but the witch challenges the structure of overarching male governance. The charge of

¹ Laurel Zwissler, “Witches’ Tears: Spiritual Feminism, Epistemology, and Witch Hunt Horror Stories,” *Pomegranate* 18, no. 2 (2016), 180.

² Kristen J. Sollée and Coz Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive*, (Berkeley: Three L Media, 2017), 16.

witchcraft was used to enforce societal parameters of female normality and acceptability.³ Victims of such charges were overwhelmingly female—modern statistical analysis shows that women made up overall 70-80% of those tried for the crime of witchcraft in early modern Europe and New England.⁴ Women were especially vulnerable to accusations, as they lacked cultural and material resources and authority, making it difficult and often impossible for them “to quell or divert the consequences of popular paranoia” stirred during witch-hunts.⁵ The persecution of female violations of societal norms continues in the modern day, with associations alleged between witchcraft and outspoken feminists and female figures of power. Famously, television evangelist Pat Robertson stated that “The feminist agenda [...] is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”⁶ During her presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton was referred to as “a witch with a capital ‘B’” and linked to Lucifer.⁷ The symbol of the witch retains its prominence in modern culture, though its meaning has diverged over time.

Some modern feminists have interpreted the history of persecution of witchcraft as a persecution of a Neolithic Goddess-centered matriarchal religion. Witch-hunts have been portrayed “as a brutal means by which patriarchy exerted control over women and sought to curb the perceived threat posed to men’s dominance of early modern society by women’s allegedly rapacious sexuality” and the “illicit” knowledge of female healers and midwives.⁸ Many inaccuracies, however, have been incorporated into writings on witchcraft in recent centuries,

³ Elizabeth Reis, *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America*, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1998), xii.

⁴ Alison Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe.” *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, 2013. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199578160.013.0026

⁵ Reis, *Spellbound*, xii.

⁶ Kenneth J. Cooper and Maralee Schwartz, “Equal Rights Initiative in Iowa Attacked,” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 1992.

⁷ Stacy Schiff, “Witchcraft on the Campaign Trail,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/opinion/witchcraft-on-the-campaign-trail.html>.

⁸ Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender.”

which have been uncritically adopted in radical feminist ideologies.⁹ For example, Matilda Joslyn Gage, a leader of the women's suffrage movement, "saw witch hunts as oppression of women, as driven by greed for power and money, *and* as a misunderstanding of a surviving, women-centered religion."¹⁰ Yet, little evidence supports that an active practice of such a religion existed.¹¹ Additionally, witch-hunts in the Early Modern era did not empower the prosecuted female witches, but rather emphasized their feminine deficiencies.

Women were considered more susceptible to witchcraft because of their weakness of mind and temperamental emotions. Court records detail various stereotypical explanations for the increased risk of witchcraft and demonic possession in women. For example, women were considered easy targets for the devil because "The female body was thought to be of a humid, frigid and weak condition," and "The female mind could be easily impressed, because women's nature was fluid, volatile, and inconstant."¹² Gendered arguments were frequently relied upon during witchcraft trials, both in defense and accusation.¹³ Women's weakness was seen as a reason for increased suspicion and blame for succumbing to the temptations of the devil, and simultaneously as an excuse for falling prey to forces of evil imposed upon them. In the case of Margaret Rule, tried in Salem in 1692, both her prosecutor, Robert Calef, and her defender, Cotton Mather, used gendered arguments to argue her case. Calef evoked "women's fluid natures to a predilection for vices associated with witchcraft and possession," presenting a "titillating" argument for "women's willingness to be possessed, whether sexually by men or spiritually by devils," and depicting Rule as "a licentious fraud."¹⁴ Meanwhile, Mather reinforced traditional

⁹ Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Gender."

¹⁰ Zwissler, "Witches Tears," 183.

¹¹ Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Gender."

¹² Laura Kounine and Michael Ostling, *Emotions in the History of Witchcraft*, (London: Springer Nature, 2016), 105.

¹³ Erika Gasser, *Vexed with Devils: Manhood and Witchcraft in Old and New England*, (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 7.

¹⁴ Gasser, *Vexed with Devils*, 147.

assumptions that women are susceptible to witchcraft and possession by demons to absolve Margaret from blame.¹⁵ The female witch was not personally empowered, but rather borrowed her power from the male devil, by whom she was seduced and manipulated—all agency was removed from the female subject. As Alison Rowland notes, “Such was the power of patriarchy that even the witches’ sabbath—supposedly the archetype of inversion—was imagined as governed by men: the male devil, assisted by male officials and kings of the sabbath.”¹⁶ Even the archetype of female evil was a servant of male evil.¹⁷

Witch-hunts punished powerless women who were marginalized in society, with accusations informed by and based in societal expectations. Witches were viewed as vengeful and malicious beings who did not properly regulate their emotions.¹⁸ Often, women were held to impossible double-standards, condemning them whether they conformed or not. For example, women were expected to be outwardly emotional and passionate, and “the witches’ incapacity to weep tears of remorse labelled her or him as a minion of Satan.”¹⁹ Trial records narrate stories “of witches who only feigned tears with saliva or who moaned without producing tears at all,” and of

¹⁵ Gasser, *Vexed with Devils*, 147.

¹⁶ Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender.”

¹⁷ The persecution and punishment of witches was also often sexual in nature. The process of possession was often believed to occur through sexual intercourse: “The devil himself had entered the body of the witch during coitus and had taken possession of its material and imagination” (Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 105). The torture and humiliation of suspected witches included stripping, gang-rape, and bodily dismemberment, such as cutting off the breasts and rubbing them against the victim’s face (Zwissler, “Witches’ Tears,” 176-200). More subtly, during the Salem witch trials of 1692, three women of low social status (two maidservants and a slave) were noted to be wearing finery above their status, which was considered an indication of consorting with the devil, who could provide material luxury (Sollée and Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 151). The policing of women’s clothing is generally by extension a policing of women’s rights to their own bodies—notably, in recent decades, women’s clothing has been used an argument to exonerate sexual assault (Sollée and Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 156). As with modern sexual assault trials, witch trials often emphasized and relied upon the societal perception of the woman. Whether rape victim or witch, what mattered was not who the woman was or what she desired, but how she was perceived by her assailant or her accusers. Most of our records of the Early Modern witch rely on court records or demonology, rather than writings by witches themselves. The witch was an ultimately negated identity, defined then and now through others rather than by herself. Like most forms of misogyny, the persecution of witchcraft reduced women to objects, with no subjective agency, denying them even the most basic right of self-ownership.

¹⁸ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 173.

¹⁹ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 107.

witches who “laughed and cursed,” “looked around suspiciously, rolling their eyes and grimacing awfully,” or “fell asleep whilst being tortured.”²⁰ Their lack of sensitivity and distress was attributed to evil magic in the form of salves or amulets.²¹ But women’s excess of emotion and passion was also an indication of susceptibility to the devil’s possession. The temperamental witch allowed the devil to channel her internal desires, providing both an explanation and venue for her “overwhelming emotions.”²² For disempowered, impoverished women, the devil provided an outlet for their own prohibited desires, and “only with the Devil’s encouragement and assistance” could they pursue their emotional impulses.²³ Femininity was also associated with nature. Women were considered mysterious and mercurial like nature, whereas men were rational. Thus, the “natural magic,” magic associated with occult forces of nature, was an inherently feminine practice, and “was caught up along with popular superstitions, witchcraft, and consort with demons.”²⁴ Natural magic and witchcraft were denounced as attempts to harness powers “not controlled or sanctioned by the Church, and hence [...] superstitious and presumptively diabolical.”²⁵ Witch-hunts persecuted both deviation from traditional femininity and traditional femininity itself.

While witch-hunts were uncontestedly misogynist and targeted predominantly women, the psychological and societal motivations behind them are more complicated. Numerous societal factors contributed to the accusation and indictment of witches. As Rowlands demonstrates, women over the age of fifty formed the demographic most often prosecuted of witchcraft, though historians dispute the reasons for their over-representation.²⁶ Most arguments point out that older

²⁰ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 107.

²¹ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 107.

²² Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 185.

²³ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 184.

²⁴ William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 195.

²⁵ Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 205.

²⁶ Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender.”

women could be more knowledgeable and assertive than younger women, thereby presenting a greater threat to the patriarchal hierarchy of power. Regardless of gender, being related through blood or close social connections to a prosecuted witch increased one's likelihood of being accused.²⁷ Practicing magical arts also increased the risk of persecution, and male practitioners could also find themselves put to trial for their pursuits. Not all magic was considered evil, as "white magic" and popular medicine were also pursued, in the form of healing spells or herbal remedies, but "good" magic was largely associated with men.²⁸ Demonologists, who wrote about the evils of witchcraft, "thought and wrote within a system of dual classification, within which they automatically associated women with the negative (evil/devil/witch) and men with the positive (good/God/not-witch) side of any pair of binary opposites."²⁹ But "leakage" was still possible across the gender boundary.³⁰

All members of society who did not conform to patriarchal expectations were vulnerable to charges of witchcraft. Court records show that accused women were considered "the inverse of the good housewife and mother," and likewise male witches, though rarer, "represented the inverse of the good husband and father."³¹ The prosecution of Reverend George Burroughs during the Salem witch trials provides a contrast to Margaret Rule. Burroughs was not feminized, but rather criticized for his flawed masculinity, his simultaneous excess and dearth of expected masculine traits. His accusers condemned his suspicious breadth of knowledge, his harsh correction, and his attempts to control others—an excessive performance of masculine qualities. They also denounced his deficiency of husbandly care and pastoral guidance. Burroughs was cast "as one who abused

²⁷ Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Gender."

²⁸ Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Gender."

²⁹ Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Gender."

³⁰ Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Gender."

³¹ Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Gender."

the prerogatives of patriarchal authority and who failed to show sufficient care to dependents.”³² Though he refused to confess, Burroughs was found guilty and executed. By failing to conform to societal expectations of masculinity, Burroughs also fell victim to the witch-hunt.

The persecution of witches, therefore, was a persecution of those outside the norm, those who existed at the margins of mainstream society. Witchcraft was an act of subversion, whether active and voluntary or projected by others. A large part of this subversion was accomplished through the accumulation of secret knowledge. In the early modern era, books of secrets were “a genre of ‘scientific’ writings” typically detailing recipes and formulas for household use, crafts, or medicine.³³ As printing technology improved, books of secrets were widely disseminated, and as much of their content was domestic knowledge, these books were often employed by women.³⁴ These books provide contemporary records of practices of “magic” and “witchcraft.” Some of the recipes are now considered erroneous in light of modern scientific knowledge, but some could bring about desired effects for reasons not understood to contemporary users of these texts. William Eamon writes that there were two types of secrecy in these books: social and epistemological. Social secrecy involved “the intentional suppression of information in order to protect knowledge from outsiders who might corrupt or abuse it,” while epistemological secrecy implied “that secrecy was a given in the order of nature, and that the “secrets of nature” are permanently and fundamentally unknowable.”³⁵ Witchcraft derived power from both forms of secrecy.

Social secrecy is an intentionally engineered concealment of acquired knowledge. For oppressed populations lacking political and economic agency, an asymmetric accumulation of

³² Gasser, *Vexed with Devils*, 109.

³³ Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 5.

³⁴ Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 252.

³⁵ Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 11.

secret knowledge is often necessary for survival. People who hold power and authority, who can live in relative confidence of their survival, need less knowledge than those whose existence is constantly threatened. As Eve Sedgwick states in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, “It is probably people with the experience of oppression or subordination who have most *need* to know.”³⁶ She explains that “it is the interlocutor who has or pretends to have the *less* broadly knowledgeable understanding of interpretive practice who will define the terms of the exchange.”³⁷ Sedgwick gives an example of the case of rape in Western culture:

The epistemological asymmetry of the laws that govern rape, for instance, privileges at the same time men and ignorance, inasmuch as it matters not at all what the raped woman perceives or wants just so long as the man raping her can claim not to have noticed (ignorance in which male sexuality receives careful education).³⁸

The responsibility of self-protection falls upon the woman, who holds less power, to manage her relationship and boundaries with the man, who has the privilege to know and think less. Women must accumulate such knowledge, unknown and unnecessary to be known by men. Oppressed populations often acquire this secret knowledge through networks of communication that exclude their oppressors, in an act of collaborative subversion. Sedgwick points out that “the precious, devalued arts of gossip,” have become “immemorially associated in European thought with servants, with effeminate and gay men, with all women,” as a method for “the transmission of necessary news,” and more importantly for “the refinement of necessary skills.”³⁹ In recent times, this phenomenon can be observed in the whisper networks of the #MeToo movement, in which actresses informed each other through secret gossip of sexually predatory men in power.⁴⁰ Social

³⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Updated Ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 23.

³⁷ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 4.

³⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 5.

³⁹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.

⁴⁰ Ronan Farrow, “From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein’s Accusers Tell Their Stories,” *The New Yorker*, October 10, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>.

secrecy is not inherent to the knowledge itself, but is created by those who handle the knowledge. Social secrecy empowers the disempowered.

Epistemological secrecy, or an illusion of it, can be generated as a byproduct of social secrecy. Secrecy empowers the oppressed by providing a network of useful knowledge for the oppressed, but also in itself generates power. Books of secrets implied “that nature was power-laden, and that this power could be exploited by those who knew, by experience, its secrets.”⁴¹ Those who did not know these secrets, then, were excluded from and denied the knowledge and power, engendering fear of the unknown secrets, though the knowledge itself may not be useful or necessary to them. Thus, non-witches harbored a deep fear of witches due to this perceived asymmetry of knowledge.

Witchcraft is often believed to be greatly influenced by intent of the witch, and the stronger the intent, the more potent the effect.⁴² The imagined “unbridled passion” of witches led people to believe in the embodiment of their intents: “quite independently of whether any witch ever felt such passion, the theory that she did so shaped demonological discourse and the assumptions of magistrates presiding over witch trials.”⁴³ Participants in witch trials were likely strongly influenced by perceived societal expectations and beliefs. The Salem witch trials began with four young girls purportedly “afflicted” and tormented by the witchcraft of three socially marginal women. The young girls displayed signs of possession with increasing intensity, as expected by their guardians and the presiding magistrates.⁴⁴ The Salem witch trials were characterized by

⁴¹ Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 79.

⁴² The *Secreta Alberti*, a book of secrets, states “sometimes good is accomplished and sometimes evil, according to whether the science is directed toward good or evil ends” (Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 72). The magic operates through secret, mysterious mechanisms, according to the witch’s intentions. As “witchcraft is fundamentally about physical harm caused by emotions,” and “emotional conflicts can make people ill,” wishing evil may have actually caused corporal effects (Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 3).

⁴³ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 7.

⁴⁴ Benjamin C. Ray, *Satan & Salem: The Witch-Hunt Crisis of 1692*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 5.

rapidly growing popular hysteria, snowballing into numerous accusations and convictions of witchcraft. Thus, whether the girls self-consciously embellished their trauma or were genuinely under extreme emotional pressure throughout the process “cannot be determined from the court records and contemporary accounts, which furnish evidence for both points of view.”⁴⁵ The behavior of the accused women, however, was more obviously manipulated. Tibuta, one of the first to be accused, was a West Indian slave belonging to Reverend Samuel Parris. During her trial, she bore signs of beating and bruising, and there was strong evidence that her master coerced her to cooperate in court.⁴⁶ The afflicted girls were likely manipulated by societally ingrained beliefs, and the accused women were also likely coerced by societal factors to play the role of the witch. Ironically, witch-hunts seem to have been driven more by the hysteria and passion of the accusers than the witches.

Simply the conviction that witches possessed a secret knowledge may have increased the potency and efficacy of their spells. If witchcraft is based on the witch’s uncontrolled anger and passionate vengeance and the victim’s acute fear, the belief in the possibility of harm may indeed intensify the effects.⁴⁷ Modern psychology and medicine have shown the astounding influence of the placebo effect. One case has been reported in which a man attempting to commit suicide by overdosing on pills experienced lowered blood pressure, low pulse, and difficulty breathing. He nearly died before recovering upon discovery that he had been in the placebo group of a clinical trial, and the pills had been sugar pills.⁴⁸ A strong belief in the mind can lead to powerful physical effects in the body. Kounine and Ostling point to research showing that as much as half of stress-

⁴⁵ Ray, *Satan & Salem*, 5.

⁴⁶ Ray, *Satan & Salem*, 35.

⁴⁷ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 206.

⁴⁸ Roy R. Reeves, Mark E. Ladner, Roy H. Hart, and Randy S. Burke, “Nocebo effects with antidepressant clinical drug trial placebos,” *General Hospital Psychiatry* 29, no. 3, (May-June 2007), 275-277.
doi: 10.1016/j.genhosppsy.2007.01.010

related absences from work are the result of modern workplace bullying, whose consequences include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and suicidal impulses.⁴⁹ Bullying can lead to higher risk for a variety of physical ailments, ranging from psychophysical problems like headache, high blood pressure, nausea, and impotence to cortisol-related disorders such as decreased immunity.⁵⁰ Bullying is, in a sense, a perceived failure “to use culturally appropriate methods of anger management,” which was also a common accusation of witches.⁵¹ Many of the symptoms presented in victims of bullying are similar to those described by purported victims of witchcraft in the Early Modern era. Today’s science offers strong support for the power of fear, engineered through secrecy. Knowledge has power, and so too does the illusion of knowledge. The apparent harnessing of epistemological secrecy lent power to witchcraft.

To some extent, practices associated with magic and witchcraft also provided avenues of subversion for oppressed populations. Official practices of science were generally prohibited to women, and women’s practices of science were not recognized as science. Throughout history, most women were illiterate, and women’s knowledge tended to be learned through action rather than intellect, such as midwifery, household medicine, culinary arts, and domestic chores. Eamon explains that such knowledge, which he terms *secreta*, “could be experienced, but because they were not demonstrable, they could not be the objects of scientific knowledge.”⁵² As much of women’s knowledge was learned experientially, it did not fall under the realm of science. These secrets “lay outside the rational ordering of nature; they were purely contingent, and could not be predicted or explained by theoretical science,”⁵³ thus falling into the domain of magic. Magic was

⁴⁹ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 198.

⁵⁰ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 198.

⁵¹ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 196.

⁵² Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 54.

⁵³ Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 58.

considered inferior to rational science, described as “a form of aimless erudition,” motivated by a meddlesome “passion for knowing unnecessary things.”⁵⁴ Practitioners of these experiential knowledges, mostly women, were often susceptible to accusations of witchcraft. Midwives in particular, who were typically poor peasant women “with knowledge of herbology, biology, and, in particular, reproductive health,” were easy victims.⁵⁵ Midwives “relied on time-tested natural remedies (in addition to spells and charms) including painkillers, anti-inflammatories, and digestive aids, many of which remain in use today.”⁵⁶ Yet, their methods, experientially proven rather than scientifically understood, often garnered suspicion from both the church and families they served.⁵⁷ Traces of these misgivings can perhaps still be detected in the restriction and suppression of knowledge and resources related to women’s reproductive health today. Much of the “secret,” experiential knowledge of women has been reincarnated and appropriated into modern sciences (medicine, chemistry, and botany, for example) without recognition. Though unrecognized, these practices still allowed women to engage in scientific practices, thereby inherently subverting a societal structure which denied them knowledge and intellect.

The symbol of the witch has also been reincarnated in modern politics and activism. Chapters of WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) have sprung up in Chicago, Portland, and Boston, gaining popularity after the presidential election of 2016. A number of witches wearing conical hats and opaque black veils participated in protest marches in Boston in 2017.⁵⁸ They explained that their veils created anonymity, which “gives us the ability to stand for all marginalized people [...] By removing our personal visages, people are able to see us,

⁵⁴ Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 59.

⁵⁵ Sollée and Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 51.

⁵⁶ Sollée and Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 52.

⁵⁷ Sollée and Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 52.

⁵⁸ Gabby Bess, “How the Socialist Feminists of WITCH use Magic to Fight Capitalism,” *Broadly*, October 2, 2017. https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/yw3bpk/how-the-socialist-feminists-of-witch-use-magic-to-fight-capitalism.

relate to what we stand for, and recognize that any one of them could be us.”⁵⁹ They also stated that while practices vary, most traditions of witchcraft include “worship of, or at the very least, respect for the Earth and an understanding of interconnectedness.”⁶⁰

Modern witch societies often draw inspiration from Starhawk’s canonical writings, which reshape witchcraft into a practice more suitable for this era. I would argue that Starhawk’s philosophy in turn descends from Early Modern Neoplatonic traditions of natural magic, which emphasize the internal interconnectedness of all beings. The *Magia Naturalis* (1558) by Giambattista Della Porta suggests that “the deepest secrets of nature were all instances of attraction and repulsion, sympathy and antipathy, love and hate, which jointly govern the economy of properties,”⁶¹ and that “The celestial intelligences, the stars, and the planets were thus links in a chain of multiple causation in which form, emanating from God, permeates the universe like the rays of the sun emanating from a central source.”⁶² Similarly, Starhawk writes, “Those who had the inner power learned that it increased when they worked together,”⁶³ and “The Goddess does not rule the world; She *is* the world. Manifest in each of us, She can be known internally by every individual, in all her magnificent diversity.”⁶⁴ Both Della Porta and Starhawk argue that individuals are connected and linked through internal forces that allow them to communicate and influence one another. Secrecy is also emphasized both in Early Modern traditions and by Starhawk.⁶⁵ Starhawk’s definition of knowledge and secrecy strongly reflects the *secreta* sought

⁵⁹ Bess, “Socialist Feminists of WITCH.”

⁶⁰ Bess, “Socialist Feminists of WITCH.”

⁶¹ Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 211.

⁶² Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 213.

⁶³ Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 4.

⁶⁴ Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 9.

⁶⁵ “Witchcraft has always been a religion of poetry, not theology. The myths, legends, and teachings are recognized as metaphors for “That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told,” the absolute reality our limited minds can never completely know. The mysteries of the absolute can never be explained—only felt or intuited. Symbols and ritual acts are used to trigger altered states of awareness, in which insights that go beyond words are revealed. When we speak of “secrets that cannot be told,” we do not mean merely that rules prevent us from speaking freely. We mean that the inner knowledge

after by Early Modern practices of witchcraft, as recorded in books of secrets that describe knowledge that must be acquired through experience and cannot be explained. Witchcraft throughout the ages has emphasized holistic connection and internal knowledge, rather than the external observation, quantification, and removal of subjectivity upon which empirical science relies. In this sense, witchcraft and natural magic are sciences based on traditionally “feminine” qualities, in contrast to the traditionally “masculine” school of Western intellectual history.

The witch has been reclaimed by feminists as a symbol of empowerment and subversion. Characteristics which once indicated feminine weakness and deficiency in witches have been revived as points of pride. For example, witches were often persecuted for their excessive emotion, but as Kounine and Ostling point out, Progressive-era suffragists argued that women are morally *superior* to men because they are closer to emotions and nature: “women’s stronger emotionality makes them more authentic, wise, and positioned to govern justly.”⁶⁶ Modern feminist identifications with persecuted witches implicitly accept stereotypes of women as emotional, but draw different conclusions,⁶⁷ turning a once negative association into an indication of unique feminine capabilities. Aspects of witchcraft that inspired fear and persecution have been transmuted into modern practices of feminist activism. Zsuzsanna Budapest argues for the use of witchcraft and sorcery as tools of feminist self-defense.⁶⁸ Feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s met in exclusion of men, allowing for “intimate discussions about everything from workplace harassment and child rearing to the female orgasm.”⁶⁹ Such groups were reminiscent of witch covens imagined in Early Modern Europe, and their secrecy generated similar

literally *cannot* be expressed in words. It can only be conveyed by experience, and no one can legislate what insight another person may draw from any given experience.” (Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 7.)

⁶⁶ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 254.

⁶⁷ Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 263.

⁶⁸ Zwissler, “Witches Tears,” 188.

⁶⁹ Sollée and Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 174.

misapprehensions in men, who were excluded from these circles.⁷⁰ Another example of the reclaiming of derogatory female associations can be seen in SlutWalks, which have been held all over the world in the last decade. The SlutWalk movement originated in 2011 in Toronto, after a police officer commented that women could prevent sexual harassment and assault if they stopped “dressing like sluts.”⁷¹ The secrecy and subversion inherent in the history of witchcraft has survived in feminist movements today.

The recent surge in the appeal of witchcraft can be traced to various social, political, and philosophical features of the modern era. Witchcraft is often tied to spiritualism, which has generally been an empowering movement for women. As Lynn Sharp notes, because “feminine qualities were considered desirable for contacting the spirits,” spiritualism gave women an otherwise rare platform for public speech.”⁷² Traditions of witchcraft aligned with newly evolving feminist philosophies in recent decades. The “bohemian mystics of the occult revival” celebrate individual subjectivity.⁷³ Subjectivity is a mutable feminine characteristic, in contrast to masculine, rational objectivity. Again, qualities for which women were once disparaged were now praised and embraced.

Feminine traits such as connectedness, interdependence, and the wonder of mystery, became desirable in an increasingly delineated and scientifically dissected world. Mircea Eliade argues that occult practices offer an interconnected and alive model of the universe, responding to “moral and metaphysical questions that modern science has by and large not deigned to answer,” filling in a gap in a disenchanted world that science describes as the result of blind chance, lacking

⁷⁰ Sollée and Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 173.

⁷¹ Sollée and Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, 37.

⁷² Alicia Walker and David J. Collins, *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 556.

⁷³ Walker and Collins, *Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft*, 559.

in transcendent meaning.⁷⁴ Modern anthropologists interpret magic as “a form of participatory consciousness accessible to humans living in any form of society in all historical periods,” which emphasizes feeling over detachment and involves the individual in a coherent and meaningful universe animated by spiritual forces.⁷⁵ This philosophy is especially appealing to those who felt isolated in “what they perceived as a decadent, deeply fractured modern civilization.”⁷⁶ Those seeking connection can find an attractive ideology in witchcraft.⁷⁷ In Starhawk’s witchcraft, power is not derived not from hierarchy but from unity: “power is another word for energy, the subtle current of forces that shape reality. A powerful person is one who draws power into the group.”⁷⁸ Belief in the power of intention also endows the individual with agency in a universe that science describes as so massive that individuals are inconsequential.⁷⁹ The tradition of secrecy in witchcraft is also reflected in these aspects of modern practices, through the seeking of a hidden, folded connection underlying all objects and beings in the universe, and the power that can be harnessed through this connection. Whether rooted in historical accuracy or not, the witch has become an enduring and powerful symbol of emotional connection, political autonomy, and ideological freedom.

The lack of historical awareness in revivals of occult and spiritual traditions has, however, been socially problematic at times. The symbol of the witch can be powerfully unifying across various social movements, including feminism, LGBTQ rights, environmentalism, religious

⁷⁴ Walker and Collins, *Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft*, 566.

⁷⁵ Walker and Collins, *Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft*, 640.

⁷⁶ Walker and Collins, *Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft*, 568.

⁷⁷ Starhawk describes witch’s covens as: “closer than family”: a sharing of spirits, emotions, imaginations. “Perfect love and perfect trust” is the goal (Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 35).

⁷⁸ Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 37.

⁷⁹ Modern New Age and Neopagan practitioners of magic commonly believe that “Negative outcomes are the result of negative thoughts, and reality can be shifted by thought alone,” and “A critical mass of highly evolved thinkers concentrating on a particular thought can bring about change in the world,” thereby shifting both agency and responsibility back into the hands of individual humans (Walker and Collins, *Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft*, 649).

freedom, anti-racism, and anti-poverty.⁸⁰ When used without consideration of contemporary social privilege, however, it can obscure “hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality [...] in discussions around heteronormativity or white privilege and cultural appropriation.”⁸¹ Without fully understanding these histories, modern witch societies sometimes appropriate traditions and stories to suit their own political agendas. The Salem witch trials are often referenced in historically inaccurate ways.⁸² Spiritual practices often problematically borrow from or associate with Native American, African, and Eastern traditions. Cynthia Eller notes that “The joy of feminist religious syncretism is marred somewhat by the fact that when one borrows religiously, one is borrowing *from* someone (or some culture), and often without permission,”⁸³ and while this problem has sometimes troubled spiritual feminists, they still freely appropriate myths and images from wherever they fancy.⁸⁴ Productive cultural sharing and problematic cultural appropriation are divided by a fine, contested line. One solution suggests that “it is permissible to borrow from another culture, but only if one contributes something back to that culture in return,” by supporting the human rights and enduring culture of that population, for example.⁸⁵ Goddess-based religions have also provided opportunities for misogyny and exploitation, as shown in the case of Aleister Crowley, who sexually abused many of his female followers.⁸⁶ Whenever history is appropriated for modern purposes, it must be handled with consideration and care. While the transformation of

⁸⁰ Zwissler, “Witches Tears,” 195.

⁸¹ Zwissler, “Witches Tears,” 195.

⁸² Tibuta, the accused West Indian slave, has garnered a legendary reputation as a notorious witch, but “our willingness to accept Tibuta’s culpability reflects our notions of the association of evil with the dark, dangerous, feminine “other” in American culture” (Reis, *Spellbound*, xvi). Even the glorification of Tibuta tacitly accepts that she was guilty, an assumption that was engendered and reinforced by various racial and gendered prejudices against her.

⁸³ Reis, *Spellbound*, 235.

⁸⁴ Reis, *Spellbound*, 235.

⁸⁵ Reis, *Spellbound*, 240.

⁸⁶ The correlation between the worship of Goddesses and the empowerment of women is often mistakenly assumed, as “In either Christian or Neopagan systems of misogyny, Goddesses are pawns in male contests for dominion over one another, as are mortal female,” and “Only by studying the nature of diverse goddesses and their associated symbol-sets can we understand how one is used as the role model of a slave, while another becomes a genuine role model for liberation” (Reis, *Spellbound*, 264).

the witch into her modern incarnation as a symbol of female empowerment has been strengthening and beautiful in many ways, it must be careful that it corrects its history of discrimination, prejudice, and harm.

The witch was once the ultimately oppressed member of society. Accused witches tended to be of low socioeconomic status, were mostly women, and were defined entirely by the society that rejected them, rather than by themselves. In recent times, the witch has been resurrected as a symbol of female empowerment, turning many of her weaknesses into strengths. The witch's anonymity allowed for her modern universality and unity; her dependence upon nature and her emotionality became her ability to connect with forces beyond oneself; her secrecy and nonconformity transformed from qualities that drew societal punishment into celebrated traits of freedom of thought. The witch is a symbol of the human fear of the unknown, drawing power and trepidation from secrecy. Whereas since the Enlightenment, knowledge has been sought after as an unquestioned good, witchcraft serves as a reminder and warning that mysteries hold power, and power must be approached cautiously and conscientiously. Unchecked progress has driven our society in various worrisome directions, including the destruction of the environment and the violation of personal privacy through machine surveillance. While objective, empirical truths can be sought, their interpretation and application are ultimately subjective and human, driven by intent. Like magic, modern technology can be used both for world-changing good and for extreme evil, and intentions must be carefully steered toward kindness. Although historical hostilities toward witchcraft and its secrets are now in many ways antiquated and obsolete, perhaps in the modern age, when technology has advanced to the brink of magic, we can understand why those hostilities and aversions existed, and how, like witchcraft, they persist in transformed manifestations.

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