

HEX APPEAL: THE BODY OF THE WITCH IN
POPULAR CULTURE

Marley Stuever-Williford

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Committee:

Jeffrey Brown, Advisor

Esther Clinton

Angela Nelson

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ABSTRACT

Jeffrey Brown, Advisor

This thesis investigates the relationship between the body of the witch in popular culture and attitudes and assumptions about the female body. This study was conducted through textual analysis of several popular films and television shows about witches. This analysis is structured around three core archetypes of femininity: the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone, examining how each of the three archetypes preserve stereotypes about women and how witches can subvert or reinforce those stereotypes. Using the theory of abjection as a foundation, this thesis argues that witches have a strong relationship to abject femininity and can therefore expose the anxieties and fears about female bodies in a patriarchal culture. This is not a comprehensive study of witches in popular culture, and further research into the intersections of gender and race, sexuality, and ability is needed to form any definite conclusions. This study is merely an exploration of female archetypes and how the female body is conceived through the witch's body in popular culture.

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, the strongest and kindest witch I know.

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INTRODUCTION

Western culture has a preoccupation with witches. Reboots of popular culture witches past including *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Charmed*, and *The Craft* have cropped up in the past couple of years. One of *American Horror Story*'s best received seasons, *Coven*, centered on witches, and allusions to witches have been made in other popular culture projects (for example, the fictional town in 2018's *Assassination Nation* was named Salem). Meanwhile, some researchers have noticed a marked rise in neopaganism in America. The twenty teens have become the latest era in a centuries-long trend of periodic renewed interest in witches in politics, popular culture, and personal religious expression. Heather Greene's 2018 *Bell, Book, and Camera* provides a historical record of witches in American popular culture and contextualized them within the societal climate of gender and sexuality politics of their time, finding a significant correlation between how women were seen and treated politically and how witches were conceived for film and television.¹

But the Western concept of a "witch" has historical roots that go as deep as some of our oldest institutions. The witch is an idea that pre-dates Christianity, capitalism, and a number of our current gender roles and expectations. The witch is also primarily a threatening figure. She appears in folklore and fairy tales as a duplicitous villain. During the witch hunts of the 15th, 16th, and 17th century she was thought of as a consort to the devil who consumed children and caused disease. It wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that we began to see a trend of "good" witches in popular culture. What is so threatening about a witch? What fears does she embody so well that she has lasted this long, making appearances in every genre and every generation for hundreds of years?

¹ Heather Greene, *Bell, Book, and Camera* (McFarland, 2018).

The uniquely gendered nature of the witch lends the character archetype to its use as a cultural proxy for women in general; male witches, while not uncommon in real life, are few and far between in popular culture. Where they do appear, they are often set apart by a different nomination (warlock, wizard, etc.) creating semiotic distance between men and “witches.” Not all women are witches, however, just those with power. The threat of a woman with power, be it supernatural or mundane, is at the core of our fear of the witch. Power is an ever-present theme in media featuring witches, whether or not the witch is the protagonist. As we explore some popular culture texts about witches in this study, special attention will be paid to power, who has it, and what that means. Here I propose a simple equation to answer the question, “who are the witches?” A witch is a woman plus power. And in a society that’s foundations are built in the subordination of women in economics, in religion, in government, in the workplace, in school, at home, a woman with power has the potential to erode these institutions and bring about a societal collapse (and thus, one hopes, a rebirth in a more equitable form).

However, the power of the witch is very different from the power men have acquired in our current social structure. The power of men relies on the stability of the hegemonic structure, and the continued imposition of strict binaries. To borrow from Mulvey, “an active/passive heterosexual division of labour has [...] controlled narrative structure.”² The active/passive, subject/object construction of gender forces women into a powerless role, not just because society hates women (it does) but because that role is required to uphold our culture’s vital institutions. In a fascinating twist, the contradictions of heteronormativity have made it both extraordinarily powerful and incredibly vulnerable. Witches are powerful because they can expose and exploit the vulnerabilities of heteronormativity and a variety of other false binaries.

² Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Palgrave, Hampshire, 1989), 20.

When you give a woman power, real power, not a facsimile of what men in this culture have, but the power to disturb the binaries that make our culture, it's highly disturbing.

That fear is the fear of the abject. In Julia Kristeva's essay *Powers of Horror*, she defines the unexplored liminal boundary between subject and object, denoting the abject.³ It is represented in the between of dozens of binaries, making them fragile with its mere existence. The abject is the space between life and death, order and chaos, society and nature, man and god, male and female. These binaries are the scripts for how these are supposed to be in a world that makes sense; an idealized idea of reality that paints everything in black and white without ever recognizing the shades of gray. In that manufactured reality, women are passive, chaste, beautiful, weak, nurturing. But witches are women that are active, sexual, hideous, powerful, and ruthless. They are women who are everything women *aren't*, or rather, aren't meant to be. Thus they are cast into the abject, the realm of contradictions that repulse us and remind us of the fragility of our reality.

Art is not something I can attempt to define, but I have seen and learned over the course of my life that art is partially an expression of the human need to understand ourselves. We use art to explore and explain our feelings—so it's only natural that while the abject is largely ignored in our day-to-day lives, in art we express it openly. The abject and its relationship to media has been examined many times, particularly in horror films. It's my belief that witches are a cultural response to explain the contradictions in femininity and womanhood, making them abject figures. For that reason, their stories can both reinforce unfortunate stereotypes and be revolutionary and subversive in their portrayals of women. The figure of the witch has been reclaimed recently by feminist works. All three of the core texts used in the following chapters

³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1982).

are, I will argue, feminist texts, and self-consciously so. But because the cultural myths about witches originate from this abstract place, they also reveal and occasionally reinforce stereotypes about women.

The Western trope of the witch is, as many things in Western popular culture, also very white, Christian, Anglocentric, and heteronormative. There is a lack of overall representation of LGBTQ+, disabled, and people of color in witch media, although I suspect that has more to do with a lack of representation in general than it does with witches in particular. There is also my own position to consider: I am a white American woman, and my understanding of culture is from that perspective. I was raised on American popular culture, which has a strong Western European bias. This analysis is by no means comprehensive, and further research will have to be done to see how intersections of race and gender, or gender and sexuality, alter depictions of witches in media.

There are significant limits to this study, in intersectionality and scope, but also because it is limited to textual analysis. Further research and qualitative data could be a helpful avenue into penetrating the topic deeper to see if the thesis can be applied to a broader sample. My goal in this study is simply to introduce witches as a focal point of feminist media studies, and to encourage a deeper exploration of this archetype and its relevance to female bodies. I believe the following chapters make a strong case for its importance and raise interesting questions.

Bibliography

Greene, Heather. 2018. *Bell, Book, and Camera: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co.

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CHAPTER I: HISTORICAL WITCHES

The witch occupies a unique space among the pantheon of horror characters and villains in popular culture. She is, arguably more than any other horror or monster figure, specifically gendered; male witches are not nearly as common to the point where male characters with similar powers, traits, and defining characteristics as witches are regardless granted different nomenclature—they are called “warlocks” or “wizards” and presented alongside female witches as a contrast. This is the case in the *Harry Potter* book series (“wizard” and “witch” are used frequently to replace “man” and “woman” respectively in the parlance of magical people) and in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (“warlocks” and “witches”). The word “witch” itself carries a gendered assumption. This is no accident. The assumption of femaleness in witches dates back as far as 1487, to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the now infamous medieval witch-hunting manual. In a section about how to identify witches for trial and execution, the *Malleus Maleficarum* attributes the prevalence of witchcraft among women to a defect in judgement in woman-kind:

As for the first question, why a greater number of witches is found in the fragile feminine sex than among men; it is indeed a fact that it were idle to contradict [...]. A Woman [knows] no moderation in goodness or in vice; and when they exceed the bounds of their condition they reach the greatest heights and the lowest depths of goodness and vice. [...]

I had rather dwell with a lion and a dragon than to keep house with a wicked woman.⁴

The very construction of the witch for the purpose of 15th century witch-hunting was predicated on religious misogyny, on an assumption of a woman’s weak mind and will to resist evil.

Witches are semiotically and inextricably female. Witches are not only gendered linguistically and historically, but in the kinds of horror or power they embody. Their bodies are feminine, but

⁴ Christopher McKay, *The Hammer of Witches: A complete translation of the Malleus Maleficarum* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009), 162.

their powers and their uses are feminine as well. The myths about witches, gender, and the role of women in society persist in depictions of the witch in popular culture. It's important to establish the connection between witches and women for this analysis because the stereotypes about witches end up having a profound effect on how culture conceives of the female body. The prevailing cultural myths about women and their bodies persist on the strength of their semiotic connection to witches.

Additionally, witches are unique in the canon of the monstrous because of their clear origins in history and fiction. Witches are not a pure invention of fiction, but have historical roots in culture, religion, and society that have had profound real-world effects. People around the world have practiced witchcraft for centuries. Powerful societal institutions including law, church, and education have as recently as the 1980s operated according to a belief in and fear of witches (sometimes to deadly effect). These historical events have shaped depictions of witches in popular culture, and vice versa. This chapter aims to establish some of the long-lasting tropes about witches in pop culture. More importantly, we will be investigating the connections of these common tropes and archetypes to female bodies—their mythology, their social function, and their regulation.

Real-Life Witches

A sizable portion of witch iconography is derived from religious and cultural myths and stories. The figure of the witch is really an amalgamation of archetypes, symbols, and characters from both fictional depictions and historical reality. Disentangling fact from fiction in terms of the origins of this iconography is a difficult task. The historical and the fictional have informed on one another, and even historical records of witches are surrounded by myth and superstitious belief. Whether or not witchcraft and magic are “real,” that is to say, whether magic can be

performed to material effect, the reality of people identifying as witches and practicing witchcraft as a religious or cultural practice cannot be ignored. Their understanding of what it means to be a witch (however disparate between groups, individuals, and traditions) will be instructive to us moving forward. The cultural practices of witches have informed the depictions and resultant stereotypes of witches in popular culture. On a similar note, the persecution of witches, including at times those who did not identify as witches but were deemed such by a hegemonic authority, has been a reality at several points throughout history and in many cultures.

These periods of persecution often had alarming mortality rates and profound effects on their respective societies. The Satanic Panic in the United States in the 1980s famously saw the scapegoating of men and women as witches who preyed on children—with no evidence at all of witchcraft.⁵ There have been many instances where the persecution of “witches” did not affect any actual witches, but everyday members of a society caught up in a moral outrage at some deviant behavior. These periods of “witch panic” in history can indicate cultural turning points where the hegemonic powers of a society handed down extreme punishment to enforce cultural conformity. As conformity and deviance are to be a large theme at the center of this thesis, it is important to discuss the times in our history where witches were deemed an existential threat and, alternatively, how witches came to symbolize to a new generation a feminist upheaval of cultural norms.

Religious origins

Witchcraft as a religious practice is difficult to define, as it has been associated with dozens or more cultures and religions and how it is practiced is completely variant. Depending on what year you’re considering, and in what part of the world, “witches” may describe

⁵ Jeffrey Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Open Court, 1993).

Satanists, pagans, voodoo practitioners, brujas, faith healers, and any number of other occultists. To further confuse things, these cultural and religious identities tend to overlap, as do certain ritual practices. Add to this the countless examples of supernatural beliefs in religions and other cultural practices, beliefs, or superstitions that are not strictly religious in nature. With that being said, as far as where the idea of witchcraft originates, I'm paralyzed to make any real assertions. For my purposes, I'll be defining a *witch* as one who practices witchcraft, and *witchcraft* as a collection of modes of ritual that are intended to have a supernatural effect. This definition in itself may be too limiting, but as I wrote earlier, it's a difficult thing to define.

Paganism

The term “paganism” is fraught with conflicting conceptualizations and definitions spanning the centuries since its first use. In fact, “pagan” and “paganism” are words initially conceived by early Christians in Rome and were used to refer derogatorily to most of the existing polytheistic religions that preceded Christianity. According to Owen Davies in his book *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction*, “pagan” comes from the Latin *paganus*, meaning “rural” or “of the countryside”⁶ and the word came to imply a backwards-thinking, idol-worshipping population. Its use was so broad as to flatten the countless religious and spiritual practices of various tribes and communities into a monolith of “non-Christians,” imposing a binary of “enlightened Christians” vs. “barbaric pagans.” The result is that millennia later the various practices of otherwise unconnected faiths that pre-dated Christianity came to represent “paganism.”

Pagans were essentially non-Christians, and the two came to comprise a mutually exclusive religious divide during the development of early Christianity. For this reason, much of

⁶ Owen Davies, *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

the recorded history of this early pagan religions has been either lost to time or painted over by Christian-biased sources. The legacy of paganism is inextricably tied up with these efforts by the Christian church to quash other religions in a move towards world Christian supremacy. As such, any discussion about pagans or paganism is likely to be tainted by a hegemonic Christian perspective.

It is important to address paganism at the outset of this project because of its two primary usages in modern day. For example, the people today who are most likely to call themselves witches also commonly identify as pagans, with many in that group even using pre-Christian pantheons in their worship, including the Greek, Egyptian, and Celtic pantheons. Links to pre-Christian faiths, deities, and practices are common among 21st century witches, and referring to these practices as pagan is not terribly controversial.

Secondly, many of the religions that early Roman Christians considered to be “pagan” are closely associated with witchcraft. Characteristics of “pagan” religions (not to be confused with neo-pagan religions as referenced above, although there are commonalities) include the worship of the sun and moon, worship of nature, congregations outdoors, ritual sacrifices, multiple deities, and the use of herbs or other things from nature in prayer.

Another notable feature of many pagan religions is the worship of female deities, either solely or in addition to male deities. This fact was threatening to the simultaneous development of a stricter patriarchal social structure with biblical Christianity, one that put into place a solitary male deity and certain social expectations that would make women subservient to men. According to Merlin Stone, iconography depicting female deities was purposefully obfuscated by the Christian hegemony of the time.

In later periods Christians were known throughout the world for their destruction of sacred icons and literature belonging to the so-called “pagan” or “heathen” religions. [...] As the worship of the earlier deities was suppressed and the temples destroyed, closed, or converted into Christian churches as so often happened, statues and historic records were obliterated by the missionary fathers of Christianity as well. Though the destruction was major, it was not total. [...] The enormous number of Goddess figurines that have been unearthed in excavations of the Neolithic and early historic periods of the Near and Middle East suggest that it may well have been the evident female attributes of nearly all of these statues that irked the advocates of the male deity. Most “pagan idols” had breasts.⁷

The identity and character of paganism has been blurred by the eventual cultural dominance of a patriarchal Christian perspective. Paganism has come to be nearly synonymous with witchcraft, although there will remain a soft distinction between the portrayal of witches in the “pagan” sense and witches in the “satanic/biblical” sense. Early Christianity did consider pagans to be un-Christian, backwards thinking and even primitive, but not necessarily “witches.” The Christian idea of a witch came to possess specific Satanic qualities that were secondary to Christian belief, rather than just completely isolated from it as “pagans” were. It is difficult to pinpoint the moment that witches and pagans became so closely connected, nevertheless the pagan witch has lasting cultural meaning that has influenced the depictions of witches to this day.

The witch hunts

No examination of witches in popular culture would be complete without mention of the infamous witch hunts of American and European history. The witch hunts refer to a period

⁷ Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1976), xix.

between the 15th and 17th century in Europe and the American colonies that saw the trial, torture, and execution of thousands of people that were accused of witchcraft. There were an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 people killed in the roughly three centuries during which they took place.⁸

According to Brian A. Palvac, in the 12th and 13th century Christianity did not accept the existence of witches or witchcraft and regarded them as a pagan superstition:

[W]itches were not a serious concern among most medieval clergy. They were to condemn belief in magic and discourage superstitious attitudes. Hence, Church leaders and thinkers often expressed skepticism that magic was anything more than a delusion sent by the Devil to turn people from proper Church teachings.⁹

Beginning in the 13th century, heresy trials became an increasingly common occurrence, primarily targeting Muslims and Jews. Eventually, belief in witches began to rise among Christian clergy and rank-and-file parishioners in medieval Europe, caused in part by the increasingly popular belief in demons and the ability of the devil to manipulate the natural world. When the Witch Trials began, those accused of witchcraft were assumed to have consorted with Satan in exchange for their powers. Witchcraft became a catch-all blame for all of society's ills, including the death of livestock, the spread of disease, and the narrowing of crop yields. Witches were further accused of causing impotence and infant mortality rates. As many women in medieval Europe served in their communities as midwives, reproductive woes were attributed to the "witchcraft" practiced by those that provided any non-church sanctioned medical care. Silvia Federici wrote on this in her book *Caliban and the Witch*:

⁸ Jeff Wallenfeldt, "Salem witch trials," Britannica.com, April 24, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Salem-witch-trials>

⁹ Brian A. Palvac, *Witch Hunts in the Western World* (Greenwood Press, Westport, 2009), 29.

We also know that many witches were midwives or ‘wise women,’ traditionally the depository of women’s reproductive knowledge. The *Malleus* dedicated an entire chapter to them, arguing that they were worse than any other woman, since they helped the mother destroy the fruit of her womb, a conspiracy made easier, they charged by the exclusion of men from the rooms where women gave birth.¹⁰

The victims of the Witch Trials were mostly women. As many as 80% of the victims of the witch trials were women. *The Malleus Maleficarum* became the most useful tool of the Christian clergy and local governments to identify weak-willed women who had been seduced by the devil into witchcraft. *The Malleus Maleficarum* is arguably the earliest example of a popular culture text on witches. It was first published in 1487 and according to *The Encyclopedia of Witches, Witchcraft, and Wicca* by Rosemary Ellen Guiley, for 200 years it sold more copies than any other book besides the Bible.¹¹ Much of the prevailing iconography associated with witches can be traced back to this text; its premise as a guide for identifying witches for torture and execution led to these characteristics getting a dangerous reputation. Women that were targeted tended to be unmarried, widowed, or elderly—i.e., women that were not fit to reproduce and therefore could not be brought under the thumb of a developing capitalist and misogynist economy and culture through the mechanisms of marriage and motherhood.

The methods used to identify witches circulated frequently around the body. A “witch’s mark” was said to be a visible sign on a woman’s body where the devil had touched her. Women were stripped naked in front of the courts and examined from head to toe and any bump, mole, skin tag, freckle, or scar would be considered evidence of a witch’s mark. It was a humiliating practice that added insult to injury—the women “proven” to be witches were sentenced to death.

¹⁰ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Autonomedia, Brooklyn, 2014), 182.

¹¹ Rosemary Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Witches, Witchcraft, and Wicca* (Facts on File, New York, 2008), 223.

In the 21st century, “witch hunt” is a term used colloquially to refer to any large-scale scapegoating done by a culture. Calling criticism of one’s actions a witch hunt has become a popular technique among the powerful to redirect criticism away from themselves. That is not the definition that will be employed in this analysis. The witch hunts and trials from the past were a measure taken to redistribute power to men and to the church. They serve today as a symbol for how the continuing legacy of misogyny blames women for society’s troubles, and in fact a “witch hunt” is better described as when a marginalized person is scapegoated.

“Women’s work”

The domain of the witch is the home; she concocts potions in a cauldron in a kitchen, grows mysterious herbs in the garden, and reads tea leaves in the parlor. Historically, witches were folk healers and midwives that used generational knowledge to practice medicine and in fact, medicine of this nature was a female-dominated field.¹² It wasn’t uncommon for women in medieval Europe to have gainful employment as doctors and midwives. What we today call obstetrics medicine 14th century Europeans saw as miracle work—the miracle of birth.¹³ However, the economic shift to a capitalist Europe required women’s role in society to be redefined and enforced, ideologically and physically, according to a strict patriarchal order.

Silvia Federici describes how the witch trials were a means of bringing the bodies of women under patriarchal control to institute a capitalist economic system.¹⁴ Women's bodies became a commodity in the newly emerging capitalist economy and the role that women play in that economy was predicated on assumptions about femaleness that was the result of the witch’s role in the community and the home. There is a triangular relationship of meanings between

¹² Federici, 201.

¹³ Federici, 31.

¹⁴ Ibid.

femininity, domesticity, and witches that are woven together. In the right context, one implies the other two. However, as Federici argues, the labor of women was not always restricted to nor associated with the home. From Federici:

By the 15th century, women formed a large percentage of the population of the cities. Here, most of them lived in poor conditions, holding low-paid jobs as maids, hucksters, retail traders (often fined for lack of a license), spinsters, members of lower guilds, and prostitutes. However, living in the urban centers, among the most combative part of the medieval population, gave them a new social autonomy. [...] While usually the poorest members of urban society, in time women gained access to many occupations that later would be considered to be male jobs. In the medieval towns, women worked as smiths, butchers, bakers, candlestick makers, hat-makers, ale-brewers, wool-carders, and retailers.¹⁵

But the development of capitalism in the American colonies and in Europe required the primitive accumulation of an exploitable labor force, initially in the form of slave-labor. However, as mortality rates and unrest climbed, the onus to replenish the depleted labor force of the emerging capitalist economy was put on women. Women had to be removed from the economy and the work force and oppressed in the home to ostensibly become baby factories.¹⁶ Federici details how the process of reproduction for the purposes of expanding the proletariat class became devalued entirely, until it ceased to be recognized as labor at all, ultimately bringing the bodies of women fully under patriarchal control. Per Federici:

¹⁵ Federici, 31.

¹⁶ Although, if we're keeping in mind the Marxist foundation of Federici's argument, perhaps the better metaphor is that women became baby-factory *workers*.

In the new monetary regime, only production-for-market was defined as a value-creating activity, whereas the reproduction of the worker began to be considered as valueless from an economic viewpoint and even ceased to be considered as work. [...] But the economic importance of the reproduction of labor-power carried out in the home, and its function in the accumulation of capital became invisible, being mystified as a natural vocation and labelled “women’s labor.” [...] These historic changes—that peaked in the 19th century with the creation of the full-time housewife—redefined women’s position in society and in relation to men. The sexual division of labor that emerged from it not only fixed women to reproductive work, but increased their dependence on men, enabling the state and employers to use the male wage as a means to command women’s labor.¹⁷

The process of changing the role of women in the economy took centuries of societal restructuring and further disenfranchisement of women. Women who could previously live alone or in communities with other women were now the subject of dangerous rumors. Those women who could not or would not conform to the new social role of wife and mother were accused of being witches, old hags that chose to congregate in covens rather than live in a good Christian home lead by a productive male. When the Witch Trials began, the primary targets proved to be those women who failed to fit into the emerging social order.

Witch Archetypes

Fictional depictions of witches in popular culture can generally be divided into three broad archetypes; all are called witches but the signifiers change as well as their general purpose in the narrative. While the signifiers of these categories overlap some, their division into sub-

¹⁷ Federici, 75.

groups can help us to understand the varied purposes of witches (and thus women) in popular culture, even when those purposes seem to contradict each other.

The fantasy witch

The fantasy witch broadly encompasses the witch as she is depicted in fantasy genre fiction and fairy tales (oral, literary, and filmic). The origin of a fantasy witch's magic is rarely explained or explored, and usually comes from some innate skill or is passed down hereditarily. This would include more generic depictions of witches who are not seen to perform "witchcraft" in the ritualistic sense. Some examples of popular culture witches in this category could include most of the Disney villain witches, like Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* and the queen from *Snow White* (although her magic has some crossover with pagan witches, discussed below), as well as a majority of the "witchcraft" performed in the *Harry Potter* series.

The satanic witch

The satanic witch can be identified by her direct ties to Satan worship and more generally, occult signifiers. This was the principal construction of witchcraft of the witch trials in England and the American colonies. The satanic witch is depicted as practicing dark or demonic magic, including blood sacrifice, drawing reversed pentagrams (thought to represent the two-horned Lucifer), reading occultist texts, and chanting in Latin. The magic of satanic witches is curiously an aesthetic foil to Catholicism. Exorcisms of demons in pop culture usually require a Catholic priest, and the robes satanic witches wear (long, black, and hooded) are not unlike the robes that Catholic bishops wear. Catholic worship incorporates a large array of pagan ritualistic practices, such as chanting, incense burning, and transubstantiation (the practice of taking communion which becomes the blood and flesh of Christ upon eating). Satanic witches can be a convenient stand-in visually to contrast Catholics in the symbolic battle between good-and-evil.

It is also worth noting that the institution of Catholicism is deeply patriarchal; women who have been ordained are not recognized by the church as being priests officially. As witches are largely gendered female, and priests largely gendered male, the battle between them becomes tinged with gendered significance. The practices that priests engage in popular culture to contain the satanic efforts of witches could be coded as a battle between the patriarchy and the struggle of freedom for women.

Occasionally, the idea of perfect freedom will be connected with both satanism and witchcraft, and satanic witchcraft thus. The Satanic Temple has listed in its seven fundamental tenets that “one’s body is inviolable, subject to one’s own will alone. The freedoms of others should be respected, including the freedom to offend. To willfully and unjustly encroach upon the freedoms of another is to forgo one’s own.”¹⁸ The recent Netflix series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* follows in this vein, while ultimately offering a critique of patriarchal religious institutions. In the following dialogue, Father Blackwood, the High Priest of the fictional Church of Night, preaches to Sabrina about the nature of “The Dark Lord” Satan:

SABRINA: I’m not an evil person, Father.

BLACKWOOD: [laughs] I’m glad to hear it. Neither am I, neither are your aunts...

SABRINA: But the devil...

BLACKWOOD: The Dark Lord, yes?

SABRINA: ...he’s the embodiment of evil.

BLACKWOOD: Incorrect. He’s the embodiment of free will. Good. Evil. Those words matter to the False God but the Dark Lord is beyond such precepts.¹⁹

¹⁸ The Satanic Temple, “Tenets,” <https://thesatanictemple.com/pages/tenets>. Accessed 13 December 2019.

¹⁹ *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, P1, E2, “Chapter Two: The Dark Baptism,” directed by Lee Toland Krieger, aired 2019 on Netflix, [00:02:55].

Blackwood is telling Sabrina a lie in this scene, but the inspiration for the tenets of the Church of Night were clearly drawn from those of The Satanic Temple.

The free will to make decisions about one's own body should rightly strike a chord with those familiar with the pro-choice movement. In fact, members of The Satanic Temple sued the state of Missouri in 2018 for the passing of a strict abortion law that Satanists claimed infringed their religious freedom.²⁰ Satanism, in some of its forms, could therefore be constructed, especially in popular culture, as the exercise of free will by witches against the patriarchal institutions of law and religion that they are so often cast as a hindrance to or a violation of.

This extends back historically, as the *Malleus Maleficarum* characterized witches as patrons of Satan, violating the will of God and the church.²¹ The witch trials were a combined effort of institutional patriarchy from the church and local governments to punish and execute women who were seen to be not properly conducting themselves or attending to the rights of men. The element of Satan worship and dark magic was a necessary component of the witch trials to accuse the women targeted of evil acts that put the community in danger. The construction of the Satanic witch will appear frequently in this analysis, due to its deliberate connection to the violence enacted on women during the witch trials.

The pagan witch

The pagan witch could also be termed the “traditional” witch, and her signifiers pull most from the traditions and rituals of pagan religions. This construction is the “truest” to reality, as its imagery reflects the continuing practices of real witches, which will be broadly defined here as

²⁰ Dan Mangan, “Satanists say rules in Missouri’s strict abortion law violate their religious beliefs,” *CNBC*, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/01/25/satanists-say-missouris-abortion-law-violates-their-religious-beliefs.html>. January 25th, 2018.

²¹ McKay, 204.

people who practice witchcraft, both religious and secular. Some identifiers of pagan witches would be a grimoire or book of shadows, potion-making, herb collections, wands, cauldrons, familiars, kitchen instruments such as a mortar and pestle, pentacles, tarot cards, pendulums, and crystals. The pagan witch is often depicted as a woman in touch with nature, conducting the majority of her worship outside in forests and meadows, working in the garden, and caring for animals. A familiar is an animal spirit that assists a witch in her magic, most commonly a black cat.

Some of this imagery bleeds into other depictions of witchcraft; the grimoire or Book of Shadows can be portrayed with satanic witches as a book of dark magic, and fantasy witches are often portrayed with wands and cauldrons. However, the material artifacts of witchcraft have their roots in the pagan traditions of hundreds if not thousands of pre-history and early world religions. Neo-paganism, the movement of witchcraft practiced in modern day, is a multicultural miscellany of pagan traditions from across countries and continents. Depictions of pagan witches include many non-western constructions of witchcraft, including voodoo and Shintoism.

The term “pagan” is broad and its definition contested; it has been defined as any nature-based religion or any polytheistic religion, while others still argue that it is a term to describe non-Abrahamic religions or any religion that pre-dates Abrahamic religions. In popular culture, pagan witches commune with nature and the earth. For purposes of this analysis pagan will be used to describe nature-worship that may or may not include the practice of witchcraft. The lengths that paganism goes to connect witches, and by extension, women with nature provide a different but equally important insight into the way witches are used to symbolize women’s bodies in popular culture. The connection between nature and women deserves detailed attention,

as the assumption of femaleness in the powers and mystery of nature has been used in both efforts to oppress and liberate women throughout modern history.

The “nature” of women

Femaleness has long been associated with nature to contrast the seemingly “masculine” forces of technology, science, and progress. Modern day cultural feminists lay claim to these stereotypes as the essence of femininity and the role that women are designed to play in the balance of nature and humanity. The supposed connection between womanhood and nature, that being defined here as the things that are not man-made such as the Earth, naturally growing native plant and animal life, weather, seasons, ocean tides, and so on are inherently feminine. Subsequently, all associated signs of nature and their meanings have been transferred onto female bodies. The construction of nature vs. humanity, instinct vs. reason, and woman *as* nature places women in a dichotomy with women on one side and “humanity” on the other, creating an inherent otherness to women that conceives of them like a separate species.

There is a trend in literature, art, and popular culture alike to compare women and their bodies to things that exist in nature, and the attached meanings of wildness, unpredictability, evolution, beauty, chaos, spirituality, intuition, and sexuality (particularly promiscuity) come along with those comparisons. There are countless classic examples of this phenomenon from as far back as Greek mythology and as recently as modern pop music and film. Consider nymphs, the Greek archetype of nature deities, all of whom were young women. Per the Ancient History Encyclopedia:

Nymphs are often the mothers of heroes, as was the case for Achilles and Theseus, on account of the tendency for Greek males to become enamored with their preternatural

beauty and seductive charm, so different from the reserved and chaste wives and daughters of the *polis* or city-state.²²

The deliberate contrast remarked upon here between nymphs, the beautiful and seductive women of nature and “wives,” the chaste members of the patriarchal, governed society can be particularly instructive to us here. Women who are connected with nature are thus connected with seemingly innate sensuality. Nymph in modern parlance is used most often as a prefix in words like “nymphomaniac,” defined as a woman with an uncontrollable sexual desire. “Nymphet” is a term coined infamously by Humbert Humbert, the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*:

Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets'.²³

Humbert calls the young girls he finds sexually attractive “demoniac,” implying that his attraction to them is a possession over which he has no control. Note also the use of the word “bewitched,” in the above quote. The connection between women and “witchcraft,” especially in cases of the sexual desires of men, is deeply forged in popular culture. Later in this analysis, I’ll address the racially biased way this construction is used against women of color. Orientalism, witchcraft, and racist misogyny are intimately linked on the strength of the association between women and the unknowability of nature.

Femininity and nature metaphors extend to include conceptualizations of nature as a concept in the “Mother Earth” archetype. Mother Earth ties nature and preservation of Earth to

²² Gabriel Jones, “Nymph,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ancient.eu/nymph/>. August 29th, 2013.

²³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1955).

maternity. The idea that Earth is a feminine being that cares for and provides for humanity has a number of dangerous implications for both the planet and women because of their association with each other. Femininity becomes natural, wild, untamed, unpredictable, a resource, and a source of life while the Earth becomes vulnerable, rape-able, maternal, productive, protective, giving, and sacrificing.

Examples of femininity or motherhood being used as a metaphor for nature, and vice versa, arise frequently in popular culture because of the associations forged by the Mother Earth or Mother Nature archetype. Darren Aronofsky's controversial 2017 film *mother!* was a critique of humanity's abuse of natural resources through the narrative of an abusive relationship. The husband (called "Him" in the credits) over the course of the movie allows hundreds of strangers to enter, pillage, and destroy the home his wife (credited as "mother," played by Jennifer Lawrence) built from ashes. When she gives birth, the husband presents her child to the strangers, who then steal and eat her child, taking and consuming the last thing of value she had away from her.²⁴ The film plays out like a nightmare, with events that should take years passing in mere hours at an unceasing pace, which symbolizes the speed at which the planet is destroyed by human activities relative to its age. There are other themes present, such as Him being a renowned poet (the artist is God, of course) and ever-obvious biblical allegories, but the environmentalist theme is arguably the best developed and most coherent in the film. In interviews about the film, Jennifer Lawrence confirmed the mother earth symbolism as being a primary theme in the script.²⁵

²⁴ *mother!*, directed by Darren Aronofsky (2017, Paramount Pictures), film.

²⁵ Adam White, "Mother! Explained: what does it all mean, and what on earth is that yellow potion?" *The Telegraph*, September 23, 2017. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/mother-meaning-spoilers-biblical-references-ending-explained/>.

In the other direction, nature has been employed as a metaphor for motherhood in works of popular culture past. In the famous children's book *The Giving Tree*, a tree watches and provides for a person from his childhood until he is an old man, giving at different stages of his life pieces of herself to help him along until she is nothing but a stump.²⁶ The tree is gendered, being referred to with she/her pronouns throughout the story. Textually, the book is about an uneven relationship, where one party gives and gives and the other only takes, as the author Shel Silverstein argued.²⁷ In discourse about the book for the decades since its release however, many saw it as a troubling allegory for motherhood with an ambiguous ending that is uncharacteristic for children's stories. The marriage of signifiers between femininity and nature has had a co-detrimental effect: women's bodies come to be understood as usable resources and the planet Earth comes to represent an endlessly giving, loving, maternal being rather than the often violent, harsh, and unpredictable combination of delicate ecosystems that it actually is. Environmental activists have argued that the "Mother Earth" stereotype can be damaging to the movement to prevent a catastrophic climate crisis, because it prevents people from imagining an uninhabitable, inhospitable Earth.²⁸

Witches are allied with symbols and signifiers of nature because of the pagan roots of witchcraft practice, but also because of the femininity of both witches and nature. In popular culture, women and nature are one and the same. Witches that have dominion or control over nature or are depicted as being able to use nature to their advantage, become symbolic of women wielding intrinsically feminine power. This can be used to the advantage or disadvantage of the

²⁶ Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

²⁷ Ruth Margalit, "The Giving Tree at Fifty: Sadder Than I Remembered," *The New Yorker*, November 5th, 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/giving-tree-50-sadder-remembered>.

²⁸ Dominique Browning, "Viewpoint: Don't Call the Planet 'Mother' Earth, *Time*, May 10th, 2013. <http://ideas.time.com/2013/05/10/viewpoint-dont-call-the-planet-mother-earth>.

cause of feminism, as textual analysis of various witches in popular culture will demonstrate in later chapters.

Maiden, Mother, and Crone

In certain neo-pagan practices, there is a collection of three femininity archetypes called the Triple Goddess. The Triple Goddess represents many things, including the cycle of time, through the construction of three women at different stages of life: the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. This construction informs not only our cultural understanding of witches, some of whom believe in this cycle as a personal journey from childhood to old age, but our understanding of women in general. An examination of popular culture texts about witches reveals an affinity for these three archetypes, all of which have their own signifiers and cultural influence. Through the Triple Goddess we can examine the portrayals of women as naïve, sexual objects (the maiden), generous and sacrificing mothers, and elderly, wise hags. The Maiden-Mother-Crone construction will be the focal point for the following three chapters, examining each in detail and looking at their portrayals in Western witch media over the centuries.

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CHAPTER II: MAIDENS

The maiden signifies the young woman; she is on the cusp of adulthood, but often still naïve. The maiden is in a transitional state, and not just between childhood and adulthood. Her future is already written, the destiny of motherhood awaits her, and so the maiden can also be conceived of as a “pre-mother.” Narratives of maidens revolve around their search for true love in the context of marriage and motherhood. The maiden is incomplete, and searches for a husband or prince to rescue her from her circumstances and transport her into the fantasy of wedded bliss. The maiden is delicate, virginal, and innocent—these three characteristics in particular are intertwined, with virginity implying innocence and vice versa. The youthful maiden in contemporary media could be captured well by the damsel-in-distress trope. A youthful and naïve girl is rescued by a masculine prince, falls in love, and lives “happily ever after,” an ending that implies there is nothing for a young woman after she finds her husband. The archetypal maiden introduces girls and young women to a host of tropes and social scripts for sexuality and love that rope them into a gendered hierarchy with men in power above them.

This collection of tropes is sometimes referred to as “compulsory heterosexuality,” a concept coined by essayist Adrienne Rich that describes how the cultural language and social scripting of femininity is tied into heteronormative bias.²⁹ The very notion of what it means to be a woman is buried under myths about femininity being synonymous with heterosexuality, as well as the hegemonic devices that prescribe the “idealized” heterosexual pairing. Maidens are meant to be demure and submissive, not by accident, but because it reinforces the social and economic dominance of men in our patriarchal culture. Maidens are meant to desire men because without men, maidens are helpless, prone to destruction, and ultimately incomplete. Maidens are meant

²⁹ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” *Signs*, 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660.

to desire motherhood and pursue it as their ultimate life goal. This again implies the pursuit of a heteronormative life- the archetypal “white picket fence” existence with a husband and 2.5 children. None of this is said to imply that this is the true natural order for women, only that the expectations of a patriarchal culture impose boundaries on a typical “female” life through the lens of heteronormativity.

Compulsory heterosexuality erases lesbian, bisexual, trans, and queer women from symbolic existence in the overall media culture. The LGBTQ+ community is in direct conflict with the hetero-patriarchal culture that dominates the West, because hegemonic powers make no space for their existence. But it also limits the definition of womanhood for all women, including straight women. Being heterosexual does not automatically equate to having the culturally scripted heteronormative desires, like marriage and children.

For many women, many of whom are not likely to realize it, the desires they have may not reflect their inner truth but are dictated to them via religion, politics, and the commercialized machinery of popular culture. As Roland Barthes argues, myth has a way of burying its origins in popular culture to appear natural. As Barthes puts in in *Mythologies*, “in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.”³⁰ The structure of myth-making in a culture makes it difficult for individuals to sort out their desires from those placed there by society, and no one exists in a vacuum. Compulsory heterosexuality is the one of the core myths of womanhood, and it makes itself present in media, whether it be aspirational or counter-hegemonic.

³⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (The Noonday Press, New York, 1972), 10.

The maiden archetype is a key feature of European and American attitudes toward women and their development. As discussed in the last chapter, the Maiden-Mother-Crone archetype puts all of the nuance and individuality of different female lives into a narrow three-stage category system. The construction also limits our understanding of women's lives to their bodies. In the case of the maiden, she represents female puberty, beauty, youth, and sexuality. Note that the sexuality of the maiden does not necessarily mean that it is *her* sexuality, meaning it does not always reflect the desires of the maiden character. Maidens are often objectified, with no room for expression of desire let alone the autonomy to pursue those desires. According to Laura Mulvey, the systematic objectification of women makes their autonomous sexuality untenable in our patriarchal society: "One crucial contribution made by Freudian psychoanalysis is to pinpoint femininity as problematic for a society ordered by masculine dominance. Female sexuality, and also the feminine in male sexuality, hover as difficult and potentially uncontrollable elements, repressed or erupting into neurotic symptoms."³¹ There is an important difference between coming into one's sexual power and being sexualized. Maidens are rarely the former and regularly the latter.

When it comes to maiden-witches, however, there are some telling subversions and twists on the maiden archetype, often involving an embrace of "abject" womanhood and a reclamation of sexual and romantic power in their relationships. Maiden-witches are also not infrequently queer-coded or even explicitly gay. Queer coding in maiden-witches can often be a side effect of the ways that a witch's access to power challenges compulsory heterosexuality. After all, if a woman doesn't *need* a man, she may find she doesn't want one either.

³¹ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Palgrave, New York, 1989), 122.

Witches, because of their semiotic relationship to body horror, nudity, and sexuality can recontextualize the tropes of the maiden and explore subversive perspectives on what it means to be a young woman. We can identify these subversions by exploring some of the common maiden-witch tropes in popular culture and their relationship to abjection and liminality. How do witches turn the trope of the naïve, sexually submissive maiden on its head?

The Teen Witch

As a subcategory of witch tropes in fiction, the teen witch is one of the most popular in the late 20th and early 21st century. The end of the 20th century gave us *Teen Witch*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *The Craft*, Willow and Tara from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Hermione from the *Harry Potter* series, and several of these series continued into the 21st century or have been recently rebooted. Teen witches appear most often in media made for young people, especially young women, and tend to explore themes of sexuality and growing up.

The concept of a “teenager” is relatively new. The economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s placed middle-class homes in positions with more buying power than ever. The “teen” category was developed as a way of marketing to a subset of American consumers with a lot of disposable income and few responsibilities. In the introduction to *Teenage: The Creation of Youth 1875-1945*, Jon Savage writes about the beginnings of the word “teenage” in American culture. “During 1944, Americans began to use the word “teenager” to describe the category of young people from fourteen to eighteen. From the very start, it was a marketing term used by advertisers and manufacturers that reflected the newly visible spending power of adolescents. The fact that, for the first time, youth had become its own target market also meant that it had become a discrete age group with its own rituals, rights, and demands.”³² However, the

³² Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth 1875-1945* (Chatto & Windus, London, 2007), xiii.

construction of the teenage girl borrows a lot from the maiden archetype, and in many ways embodies the same transitional period of time that maidens have come to represent for women.

Teens are in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, and witches have a talent for exploring the liminal space between defined categories. The maiden-witch is often a teenager, early in the process of identity formation. Because she is a witch, though, she gains access to powers that may be unavailable to her objectified counterparts. The teen witch then can be an interesting avenue into exploring some of the ways that freedom and power can be attained for maidens.

These young women are in the midst of a period of self-discovery, accompanied by a series of changes to the body that are readily abjectified in our patriarchal culture. This is where a woman's identity and her body first become entangled. The first period, for example, has been used in film to signify a girls' transition into adulthood, and the semiotic paraphernalia of menstruation, such as period blood or tampons, are met with disgust by the broader culture. Female puberty is treated as a shameful thing to be hidden from view of men. Teen witches are able to embrace the abject though and reclaim the shedding of menstrual blood as a symbol of power. What follows is a close reading of a teen witch narrative and how it explores the abject as a site of identity and power for the maiden.

Sabrina and abject power

The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina is a 2018 Netflix Original series that tells the story of Sabrina, a half-mortal half-witch exploring her identity as she tries to straddle two worlds that are at odds with each other. The character Sabrina Spellman dates back to 1962, where she first appeared in the popular series of *Archie* comics. Sabrina then got two of her own series of comics: *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* starting in 1971 and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*

much later in 2014. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* was then adapted into [a](#) sitcom in the 1990s, making Sabrina Spellman is perhaps the most famous teenage witch in American popular culture. *Chilling Adventures* is a self-conscious female empowerment narrative, with the powers Sabrina has as a witch being used as a stand-in for coming-of-age as a woman. Sabrina straddles the line between mortal and witch and between girl and woman which strengthens the theme of freedom and power as two mutually exclusive options. But Sabrina, being a true witch, lives comfortably in the liminal and rejects false binaries by choosing again and again to have freedom *and* power.

Sabrina Spellman is a half-witch, half-mortal who at the beginning of *Chilling Adventures* is rapidly approaching her sixteenth birthday. Her sixteenth birthday is the date of her “dark baptism,” a coming-of-age ritual in the vein of a bar mitzvah or quinceañera, that both marks her transition into a grown witch and, upon signing away her name to Satan, unleashes her full power as a witch. The sixteenth birthday is a common trope in witch narratives. Both the original *Sabrina* and *Teen Witch* (1989) have the sixteenth birthday centered in the narrative as the day the full potential power of the young witch will be released or realized. Certainly, [there](#) is an element of liminality present in these texts, as coming-of-age rituals work as a form of uncertainty reduction that marks the very line between childhood and adulthood. However, it’s also hard to ignore the subtext of the physical changes that turn girls into women—the first period.

Plenty has been made of the menstruation metaphor in stories about teenage girls. The bodily nature of the period, coupled with the burgeoning sexual and reproductive power that is assumed to come with it, culminates in a misogynistic horror and fascination with the transition of girls into adulthood. Emily Edwards comments on how periods are framed as horror in

narratives about supernatural women, writing, “*Carrie* (1976) provides an example of an ingenue witch who finally learns the full nature of her powers and commands them, with the worst possible result. [...] Shelley Lindsay suggests that the film offers a masculine fantasy that interprets the feminine as something horrific. [...] Poised at the threshold of the supernatural, menstruating women might be considered especially treacherous.”³³ The word “threshold” applied here is especially telling, and it belies the true nature of the anxiety of the female body. If the construction of gender dichotomy in popular culture is male as object and female as subject, male as powerful and female as powerless, then the witch is abject. She is not the opposite of a man; she is a woman with power that rejects the notion of maleness in its entirety. So many witch stories begin at this juncture then, of the sixteenth birthday that lies firmly between childhood and adulthood, in the liminal space that belongs to neither end of the dichotomy. This is especially true when the protagonist is a witch and less common when the witch is the villain or main source of conflict. Witches have the power to explain both to young women and the broader society looking at young women the anxiety and confusion inherent in liminality.

The cultural horror of menstruation is present in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, but unlike *Carrie*, it is purely in subtext. *Sabrina* engages in body horror imagery that reinforces the abject nature of witchcraft and by extension, womanhood. The imagery is often used to emphasize that Sabrina is not fully in control of her powers or her body. Specifically, the body horror comes at times when men in the patriarchal hierarchy of the story are trying to bring Sabrina under control by altering or disfiguring her body.

Season two of the series starts in on this pattern early, when Sabrina competes against a warlock for the spot of “Top Boy,” which is sort of the equivalent of a student body president in

³³ Emily Edwards, *Metaphysical Media, The Occult Experience in Popular Culture* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 114.

her school of witches. The headmaster and High Priest of her church makes it clear to Sabrina that the position is traditionally and exclusively held by warlocks. Sabrina defies, as she frequently does, the patriarchal order of her church by competing for the spot regardless. The second of three tasks set to the competitors is a “bubbling” challenge, in which the participants create a potion adding one ingredient at a time until the concoction putrefies. Father Blackwood, the High Priest, makes obvious his opinion on Sabrina’s participation in the challenge as he recites the rules: “the first to cause rancification loses. And as punishment he, or more likely, she... will ingest the spoilage. Are you ready? As potion-making is one of the more womanly arts, you may go first, Miss Spellman.”³⁴ Blackwood’s blatant sexism evokes an eyeroll from Sabrina in a moment that is a microcosm of her reaction to the structure of her coven. Every act of patriarchal control is met with resistance from Sabrina, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant. Even a passive-aggressive comment about her “likely” failure does not slip past her unnoticed or unaddressed. Sabrina adds an ingredient and the potion putrefies visibly, seeming to cough black smoke as the surface of the concoction darkens and curdles, and she is forced to drink it as the crowd cheers her on, chanting “chug! chug!” and “Sabrina! Sabrina!” Sabrina immediately vomits and continues to throughout the rest of the evening. This rejection again recalls the abject of Kristeva’s imagination, especially considering the ingredients of the spoiled potion include newborn’s blood, added by her competitor.

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body

³⁴ *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, S2, E1, “The Epiphany,” 00:31:18.

fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. [...] It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.³⁵

At first glance, this passage would seem to affirm Sabrina, the subject rejecting the potion, the abject, but putting the scene into context affirms Sabrina's embrace of the abject as a rejection of the patriarchal order within her church and her academy. Sabrina, without so much as a word of protest, brings the potion up to her lips and chugs it two-handed. While she does immediately vomit, she doesn't eject herself from the potion; she lifts her head up from the bucket she's vomiting into and gives the tiniest smile.

Father Blackwood, meanwhile, looks on the scene of Sabrina being cheered with disbelief. She has upset the order with her grit. The body horror that was intended to remove her from the contest only made her a more attractive competitor, an underdog, a martyr for the cause of gender equality. The irony in Blackwood's speech before the challenge is that he, in the same breath, calls potion-making a "womanly art" and still insinuates that Sabrina will lose. Of course, she does not really lose precisely *because* potion-making is a womanly art. The punishment Sabrina suffers, while unpleasant, does not throw her the same way just watching it take place throws both Blackwood and Nicholas, the warlock she was competing against. Both watch in open-mouthed horror, ejecting themselves from the performance as Sabrina dives quite literally head-first into the liminal space between life and death—a rotten potion made of newborn's blood. Kristeva argues that premeditated crime is abject because it demonstrates the fragility of

³⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (), 4.

the social order.³⁶ Something similar is happening in this scene as Sabrina reveals the cracks in the construction of Top Boy (and later, as she boasts to Blackwood that she will replace him to become the first High Priestess in the Church of Night) to the disgust and horror of the male participants in that social order. In “When the Woman Looks,” Linda Williams draws from Susan Lurie’s scholarship on castration anxiety and applies it to the horror genre:

Susan Lurie offers a significant challenge to the traditional Freudian notion that the sight of the mother’s body suggests to the male child that she has herself undergone castration. According to Lurie, the real trauma for the young boy is not that the mother is castrated but that she *isn’t*: she is obviously *not* mutilated the way he would be if his penis were taken from him. The notion of the woman as a castrated version of a man is, according to Lurie, a comforting, wishful fantasy intended to combat the child’s imagined dread of what his mother’s very real power could do to him. [...] Thus what is feared in the monster [...] is similar to what is feared in the mother: not her own mutilation, but the power to mutilate and transform the vulnerable male.³⁷

Blackwood and Nicholas witness their own social castration as Sabrina takes the punishment and turns it into triumph; what would mutilate *them* has only made *her* stronger.

Prudence and the limits of abjection

The theme of Sabrina challenging the control of her body though is troubled by her sometime-rival-sometime-ally, Prudence. Prudence is introduced to the series as a bully who, along with her two sisters, surrounds Sabrina in the woods, calls her a “half-breed,” and curses her. Prudence, though, occupies a similar kind of liminality to Sabrina. She and her two sisters,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks” (London, Routledge, 2002), 65.

Agatha and Dorcas, are the academy's "orphans," banded together though their shared ostracization from the rest of the witch community and its obsession with bloodlines (Sabrina's father, to contrast, was a High Priest). The three "Weird Sisters," as they're deemed, share no blood relation to one another. However, midway through season one, we discover that Prudence is in fact the illegitimate daughter of Faustus Blackwood. This makes Prudence both biracial, as her mother is black and her father is white, and not *quite* an orphan.³⁸ In season two, Prudence fights to be recognized as the daughter of the High Priest and the status and power that would come with her lineage being public, as Sabrina's is. For most of season two, Blackwood denies Prudence the right to take his name, and she remains Prudence Night (after the Church of Night), as well as one of the orphaned Weird Sisters. Agatha and Dorcas are both made aware of Prudence's ancestry, though, and immediately begin to marginalize her from their group, enacting a spell behind her back and lying to her.

Prudence's marginalization is at its most problematic in the season one episode, "Witch Academy," wherein the Weird Sisters torment Sabrina in a hazing ritual that culminates in the three of them marching Sabrina out to a tree where thirteen witches were hanged in the 16th century, Prudence pulling her along by a noose like she's a dog on a leash, and making several references to Sabrina's "half-breed" lineage. Prudence prepares to hang Sabrina and at the last second, Sabrina turns the tables on Prudence, Agatha, and Dorcas, and in conjunction with the ghosts of children who were hazed to death in a similar ritual, hangs the three girls by invisible ropes while delivering a speech about the injustice of witches turning on each other. Sabrina delivers a threatening ultimatum, releases the witches from the hanging, and then, to add insult to injury, directs an extra-personal threat to Prudence for calling her a half-breed. Sabrina maintains

³⁸ In fact, the actress that portrays Prudence, Tati Gabrielle, is a biracial woman. Her mother is Korean and her father is African-American.

the high ground in this scenario where she lynches a black woman, lectures her about the importance of women (more specifically, witches) sticking together in the face of injustice, and then defends herself against a common bi-racial slur that is used by a bi-racial character played by a bi-racial actress. In countless examples throughout the show, Sabrina's liminality and resistance to categorization is her strength. However, when applied to a brown-skinned woman, that same liminality is ironically reversed and directed back at Sabrina, if it is addressed at all. The scene places Sabrina in the role of oppressor, enacting a highly racialized iconography of violence, and it is framed as the triumph of an underdog who is tackling systemic oppression. Narratively, this scene is in perfect context with the rest of the episode. The reversal of the Harrowing (the name attributed to the academy's extreme hazing ritual), how it shares a geographic site with a witch-hunt, Sabrina putting an end to a violent and barbaric practice and defending herself without denying her lineage all make for satisfying and realistic character development. But Prudence's body is written with the codes and legacy of slavery in the United States and the marginalization of bi-racial identities. Prudence's body comes with a wealth of symbolic baggage that re-contextualizes a scene which reads very differently on paper. Even within this narrative that is often explicitly about the power in female bodies, it limits itself by ignoring the intersections of gender and race and ends up privileging Sabrina's white body over Prudence's brown one.

When the show becomes more explicitly about sexuality, Prudence is used as a foil for Sabrina in a highly problematic way. Prudence's sexuality is used to contrast Sabrina's virginity across season one and two. In the season one episode, "Feast of Feasts," Prudence is named "Queen" to be sacrificed in ritual cannibalization. In the days leading up to the feast, Prudence moves into Sabrina's house so Sabrina can wait on her and indulge her every whim before she is

eaten by the rest of the coven. One evening, Sabrina walks in on an orgy that Prudence is hosting in Sabrina's attic. Prudence tells her to "either get in or get out."³⁹ Sabrina, pulling an expression that is equals parts disbelief and disapproval, turns and leaves.

In season two, Sabrina has started to date Nicholas Scratch, the warlock from the Top Boy competition. The coven is celebrating Lupercalia, which in the context of the show is described as a "lusty, pastoral festival [...] which climaxes in a frenzy of orgiastic carnality." In other words, it is a sex holiday. Sabrina's virginity is a frequent topic of discussion in this episode, with Prudence repeatedly teasing her about her "innocence" and her "un-popped cherry."⁴⁰ This is another example of an uncomfortable racial trope being trotted out in plain view on Prudence's body, that of the Jezebel. The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia housed in Ferris State University succinctly sums up the racist dynamic at play between Sabrina and Prudence:

The portrayal of black women as lascivious by nature is an enduring stereotype. The descriptive words associated with this stereotype are singular in their focus: seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd. Historically, white women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, and modesty - even sexual purity, but black women were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory. This depiction of black women is signified by the name Jezebel.⁴¹

Furthermore, the original conception of the Jezebel was deeply entwined with "mulatto" racial identity and mixed-race bodies that were the result of white slaveowners raping and

³⁹ *Chilling Adventures*, "Feast of Feasts," 00:20:01.

⁴⁰ *Chilling Adventures*, "Feast of Feasts."

⁴¹ David Pilgrim, "The Jezebel Stereotype," (Jim Crow Museum, Ferris State University, 2012).

impregnating slaves or free multiracial women entering prostitution to survive the capitalist economy:

Many of the slavery-era blacks sold into prostitution were mulattoes. Also, freeborn light-skinned black women sometimes became the willing concubines of wealthy white southerners. This system, called placage, involved a formal arrangement for the white suitor/customer to financially support the black woman and her children in exchange for her long-term sexual services. The white men often met the black women at "Quadroon Balls," a genteel sex market.⁴²

When it comes to female bodies, *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* using Sabrina's body to challenge norms about femininity and female sexuality, and it uses Prudence's body to reinforce those norms as long as they're racially coded. In this way, both Sabrina and Prudence represent different aspects of the maiden archetype, casting Sabrina as the virtuous virgin and Prudence as the sexually "liberated" vixen. In the first season of *Chilling Adventures*, Sabrina doesn't so much upset the hierarchy as establish a new one with her on top and Prudence beneath her. Father Blackwood and The Dark Lord, the misogynistic, patriarchal figureheads of Sabrina's witchy social institutions represent the subject, expelling themselves from the abject. Sabrina is the abject, the liminal space between mortal and ageless, existing in both worlds comfortably. But Prudence is the object. She is the ideology of the witch's body as a thoughtless system of carnal lust and violence made real. Sabrina's liberation from the patriarchal order cannot liberate Prudence because it's as if she's too far gone. The aims of the text are not infrequently hampered by Prudence's presentation as a collection of racist stereotypes about black women.

⁴² Ibid.

In “When the Woman Looks,” Linda Williams argues quite effectively that horror films encourage women to identify with the monster because there is nothing else to identify with, and then punishes the woman for looking; the handsome male hero vanquishes the monster, mutilating its body, and thus brings the monster, the female protagonist, and the female audience back under patriarchal control. But what if women didn’t just *identify* with the monster? What if that monster were purely feminine? What if that monster *was* the female protagonist, and therefore the women in the audience were not punished for looking at her? The body of the witch holds within it all these possibilities. When the misogynistic disgust and fascination with female bodies pushes women to object, and aims to remove their agency and therefore uncertainty about what that body is capable of, the witch plants herself firmly in the abject; she lives in the revolting without removing herself from it. She does not rely on the negatively-defining process of self that enlightenment era philosophers are so fond of (I am *not* this, I am *not* that, so I must be *this*). *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* emphasizes Sabrina’s liminality, denying the men in the narrative a chance to affirm their identity against her.

But the show’s commentary on liminality and gender isn’t a perfect metaphor, as it uses another witch to help Sabrina negatively define herself. Prudence’s own liminality, between daughter and orphan, between white and black, between ally and enemy, is never afforded the same comfort that Sabrina’s is—and that denies Prudence the power Sabrina discovers in her abject state of being. Sabrina is a witch who gets to look. Prudence is relegated to a sexualized and racialized object under Sabrina’s, and by extension the audience’s, gaze. This conclusion rings with the missed potential of *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. However, the show does manage to emphasize and embrace the inherent contradictions of the feminine. What is liminality, after all, and what is abject, if not just a mass of uncomfortable contradictions? A

neatly ordered world, a post-Enlightenment, masculine, scientific world, rejects the possibility of contradictions to the point that it inspires disgust and terror in the feminine which for centuries now, has been characterized as a mass of contradictions. A foe to friendship. A natural temptation. A desirable calamity. A delectable detriment painted with fair colors.

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CHAPTER III: MOTHERS

While the advent of modern medicine has demystified the process of child-bearing quite a bit, there are various cultural markers of mystery, awe, and even fear about what mothers are capable of. We describe pregnancy as a “miracle,” and myths and folk knowledge about childbearing endure to the point where a subculture and economy has emerged around how best one can carry and deliver a child. Advice swirls around in local “mommy meet-ups,” on blogs, in parenting periodicals, and even on television: eat these herbs to help the child’s heart grow healthy. Take three walks per day. Get skin-to-skin contact with the child. Hire a doula, midwife, or labor coach. Attend Lamaze classes. “Traditional” knowledge about childbirth is increasingly valuable. As of 2013, these services were gaining in popularity and increasing in cost, according to an article in the *New York Daily News*: “doulas are part of the ancient tradition of women helping women through childbirth — but their service is increasingly in vogue. Private practices are popping up in New York City and in metropolitan areas across the country, where doulas can be hired as an advocate for moms-to-be in the often-intimidating hospital setting, offering assistance before, during and after labor.”⁴³ The conception that one’s OB/GYN won’t know everything you need to know about having a child has certain ties to a mythologized past of midwifery that has deep ties to witchcraft. What can a male doctor tell you that an experienced woman who has been through the process can’t? Afterall, the male-dominated perspective of Western medicine has proven to be dangerous to, and even violent towards mothers.⁴⁴ The

⁴³ Shiela McClear, “The ancient profession of doula, or childbirth coach, is making a comeback in New York and other cities,” *New York Daily News*, May 12, 2013, <https://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/childbirth-coaches-making-comeback-article-1.1340660>.

⁴⁴ Joanna Boudreux, “Naming ‘Obstetric Violence’: Coercion, Bullying, and Intimidation in Non-Evidence Based Childbirth Interventions.” *The Journal of Motherhood Studies*, October 29, 2019, <https://jourms.wordpress.com/naming-obstetric-violence-coercion-bullying-and-intimidation-in-non-evidence-based-childbirth-interventions/>.

mystery and magic of childbirth is an attractive idea, one that safely insulates the social world from its more abject aspects.

Mothers in popular culture texts are a paradox. They are both fragile and need to be treated with care (especially pregnant women), as well as capable of great feats of physical strength and pain tolerance. Hollywood loves a childbirth scene wherein the mother screams and cries and bleeds through the sheer torment of bringing a child into the world. We tell and retell legends about new mothers summoning seemingly supernatural strength to lift a car that's trapping their newborn.⁴⁵ The motherhood ideal is defined by sacrifice, especially sacrifice made for their children, and the ability to undergo incredible pain and suffering.⁴⁶

Beyond that, the ability to create something out of nothing (seemingly, as we know that isn't literally the case), has a magic unto itself. Mothers can bring something to fruition, they generate life and therefore possess a power that is only elsewhere available to God himself (this, again, being the Christian notion of a patriarchal male god, as Christianity and western culture are inexplicably tied together). This inspires in the culture a sense of awe, reverence, and indeed *fear* of the power of mothers. Kristeva addresses the abject mother in *Powers of Horror*, which Hadara Katzav summarizes deftly:

The Kristevan notion of abjection relates to what one “casts off” from oneself due to its horror-inducing, abominable, revolting quality—i.e., everything that is excluded from the symbolic order. Kristeva employs the maternal body as a paradigm and launching point for her thought about abjection. As a leaking corpus, the maternal body defies clear boundaries, threatening the solid borders of the symbolic and imaginary. Unsignifiable in

⁴⁵ Jeff Wise, “Yes, You Really Can Lift a Car Off a Trapped Child,” *Psychology Today*, November 4, 2010, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/extreme-fear/201011/yes-you-really-can-lift-car-trapped-child>.

⁴⁶ Hadara Scheffan Katzav, “‘Abjection’ As a Springboard for Maternal Subjectivity,” *Journal of Mother Studies* 1, (Sept. 2016): <https://jourms.wordpress.com/abjection-as-a-springboard-for-maternal-subjectivity/>.

its entirety (interior and exterior), it exhibits a chaotic “order.” The “I” can thus only fear/take pleasure in its partial objects. This is the autarchy of the abject—my longing for /enjoying the mother while suppressing this emotion out of great fear.⁴⁷

The mother archetype is characterized through the body. Hadara Katzav’s interpretation of the mother’s body as “unsignifiable in its entirety” reinforces the liminal, mystical construction of the womb as an extra-dimensional space. The place where life is created is not thought of as any other organ, but a place that disobeys physics and order. Conceiving of female bodies in this way contributes to a culture that treats them with both reverence and disgust, both of which carry with them an implication of *unspeakability*.

When the myth of mother and the myth of witch collide, we can begin to see the crossover from invisible object to unspeakable abject. Mothers and witches both have semiotic ties to body horror, a subset of the horror genre that centers around violations of the human body.⁴⁸ The tortuous and graphic process of childbirth makes for a fascinating body horror that alienates child-bearing persons from the rest of the public. While childbirth is something that the human body technically is designed for, it’s not an experience common to all people and an *extremely* gendered experience at that. According to Terry Arendell’s investigation into motherhood,

mothering is associated with women because universally, it is women who do the work of mothering. Motherhood is entwined with notions of femininity (Chodorow, 1989, 1990; Glenn, 1994), and women’s gender identity is reinforced by mothering (McMahon, 1995). Especially since the 19th century, mothering has been presumed to be a primary

⁴⁷ Hadara Scheffan Katzav, “‘Abjection’ As a Springboard for Maternal Subjectivity,” (2016).

⁴⁸ Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz, “Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror Is Biological Horror,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 40, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): pp. 160-168, DOI: 10.1080/01956051.2012.654521.

identity for most adult women. That is, womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories of experience. Yet not all women mother, and mothering as nurturing and caring work is not inevitably the exclusive domain of women.⁴⁹

I feel that at all times in this analysis we need to remind ourselves that gender and sex are not synonymous, and there have been at time of writing, plenty of non-female persons that have given birth.⁵⁰ It's not that uncommon an occurrence anymore, if it ever was, though there's no telling because of the systematic way that the Western canon has erased transgender identities from history. But Western pop culture depictions of pregnancy are exclusively female and are limited to certain kinds of female bodies⁵¹—that's just the nature of having such rigidly defined gender roles being so critical to the hegemonic structure of Western culture.

This is how childbirth and (especially) child-rearing have become synonymous with *motherhood* and not fatherhood or even community as many cultures throughout the world have less difficulty conceptualizing. The uniquely American myth of “housewife” that solidified in the 1950s made pregnancy and child-rearing primarily female activities that men came to have less and less to do with.⁵² In fact, most depictions of labor from that time (and the pastiche of 1950s in period piece films and tv made thereafter) would show the father far from the delivery room, in a comfortable waiting room, wearing a suit and passing around cigars. The gory body horror

⁴⁹ Terry Arendell, “Caregiving and investigating motherhood: The decade's scholarship,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62, no. 1 (2000).

⁵⁰ Angela Leung et al., “Assisted Reproductive Technology Outcomes in Female-to-Male Transgender Patients Compared with Cisgender Patients: a New Frontier in Reproductive Medicine,” *Fertility and Sterility* 112, no. 5 (2019): pp. 858-865, DOI: 10.1016/j.fertnstert.2019.07.014.

⁵¹ Sanae Elmoudden, “Policed Bodies: The Joy of Pregnancy and the Silent Loss,” *The Journal of Motherhood Studies* (October 29, 2019), <https://jourms.wordpress.com/policed-bodies-the-joy-of-pregnancy-and-the-silent-loss/>.

⁵² Debra Langan, “Mothering in the middle and self-care: Just One More Thing to Do,” *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*, 2012: 268-83. McGill-Queen's University Press. Accessed December 15, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt80b18.18>.

of giving birth to a child, the screaming, the blood, the tearing of flesh—all of this was completely excised from the father’s experience. Instead, he enjoys the *cultural prestige* of fathering a child, sharing the news with strangers, being congratulated; for the father, childbirth was a social experience. This phenomenon, one that is probably truer in media than life, is an example of how birth makes the woman abject, while solidifying the husband/father role as the subject of the social world, one that brings men more cultural and economic power. It extends to child-rearing in the role of mother as primary caregiver to the children. In this way, motherhood is a role that is crucial to the ideological reproduction of our hegemony, not to mention the *literal* reproduction needed for society to exist. Mothers not only create life; they raise the children into adults. Mothers in this way have an important role in the perpetuation of society and its hegemony.

By isolating childbirth and child-rearing as feminine roles, culture has created another paradox. The motherhood role is both abject, and severely limiting to women. But it gives women an immense power to potentially upend society if only she ever shook the false consciousness that limits her. This paradox is deeply disturbing. It embodies all of what Kristeva described as the threat of the abject: a fear of ill-defined boundaries between life and death, society and societal collapse.

The womb in many ways is the ultimate symbol of a liminal boundary. It is the place where life is created, and despite the myriad ways society tries to define that boundary, it is notoriously difficult to pin down where the difference between not-life and life really is. Arguments about abortion swirl around this definition that the two primary camps, “pro-choice” and “pro-life”, cannot seem to agree on. “Does life begin at conception?” seems to be the linchpin question in the debate. Scientifically, though, there is no real answer to this question

because the definition of life has an entirely different social meaning from the biological one. My intention here is not to get mired in this debate- the answer to “where does life come from” is obviously beyond the scope of this analysis. I instead want to point out how the existence of the debate at all implies liminality. None of us are entirely sure when a clump of cells becomes a person; one of life’s most intriguing philosophical questions springs from the *womb*, which symbolically imbues the womb with immense mystery and significance. The abject, which in many ways represents these most difficult philosophical and social dilemmas, is placed directly in the bodies of women.

Among modern-day witches, the mother archetype, specifically in the Triple Goddess construction, also represents a maximum of generative power. The full moon is a symbol for the Mother, representing things coming to fruition. In Wicca, the moon cycle is meant to enhance different kinds of magic. If one wishes to banish something, like a bad habit or unpleasant emotion, one should do it as the moon wanes. But if one wants to create something— such as a new, better habit, or a project that will take time, it is best to do so as the moon waxes from new (the beginning) to full, which represents the culmination of generative power. The spirit of the Mother in the full moon is an aid to the power of creation. Wiccans harness this power for all sorts of creative endeavors, but the symbolism is abstracted from the motherhood role.

In Western popular culture, the stories told about mothers and witches have overlapping religious and cultural significance, and that symbolism can be traced back to the abject power of the female body. The power of creation implies a power of destruction, and both are housed in the uteruses of women. As witches tend to bear the brunt of patriarchal anxieties about women’s bodies and women’s power, the mother-witch is in a way the apex of that power. The maiden’s bodily power comes from her sexuality and beauty, two traits that handily reinforce male power

and center male desire. The crone's bodily power, which we'll discuss more in the next chapter, comes from her freedom *from* male desire. The crone does not typically depend on a man either socially or economically, therefore her lack of sex appeal is not a hindrance to her power. But the mother's bodily power has the key to life, and it comes at the cost of what is depicted as an immense bodily sacrifice. A mother endures incredible pain, a mother bleeds, and because of this she can create life. With all that responsibility comes great power.

Mother as Witch's Victim

The mother is a complex figure, wrapped up in symbolism and real-life burden that leaves them both elevated in some respects and disregarded completely in others. In witch media, the mother is a unique archetype. From my research, the mother-witch seems to be the least common of the three.⁵³ Samantha from the 1960s sitcom *Bewitched* is a mother, but she also utilizes her witch powers in a domestic fantasy where she serves her husband. In most cases of witch-mothers, the offspring of the witch is presented as an obstacle for a male protagonist to overcome (such is the case of Melisandre of *Game of Thrones* and Morgana and Mordred in *Excalibur*). Instead, mothers in witch-media are more commonly not the witches, but the targets of witches. In *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), Rosemary's womb is unknowingly offered by her husband to a coven of witches. In *The Witch* (2015), Katherine is the mother to four, three of whom are killed by the witch that lives in the woods near her home; the last of her children to survive murders her before becoming a witch herself. Witches are presented as a threat to what a mother is meant to value most: their children's lives. In this way, mothers are actually more

⁵³ This is just my hunch based on my viewings, which were by no means exhaustive. It may be helpful to have a quantitative analysis of witch-mothers in media compared to other archetypes to know for sure whether this is true.

secondary targets to their children. When mothers are victimized by witches, it is primarily through their children, either by infanticide or indoctrination.

Generational threat of maiden-witches

Witches in popular culture have a 700-year-old legacy of infanticide, dating back at least as far as the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Women who had miscarriages, delivered stillborn children, or delivered children with birth defects were blamed and accused of witchcraft. In *The Witch*, the core conflict of the plot is kicked off with graphic imagery of a witch kidnapping an infant, mashing him up, and creating a lubricant from his corpse.⁵⁴ Katherine's grief escalates over the course of the film. She first grieves for the baby Samuel, and then for her son Caleb, who is kidnapped by the witch, and returned just before his death. Katherine watches Caleb die and explodes into fits of sobbing and rage. The rage is directed primarily at her daughter, Thomasin, whom she accuses of witchcraft and being responsible for the deaths of two of her sons.

Thomasin is undeniably a maiden. She's a young woman whose developing body becomes a point of sexual interest for her younger brother Caleb, an interest for which he is punished by the film. Furthermore, she plays the role of witch in the witch hunt that develops within her family. Thomasin is accused of treachery, of killing Samuel and luring Caleb into the woods. Because of a rumor that Thomasin herself spreads, soon much of the family suspects her of witchcraft. They are an English Quaker family, so Satanic witchcraft is not just a physical threat but a deeply spiritual one. A witch can destroy the family's relationship with God⁵⁵, or their chances of getting into heaven. In *The Witch*, the maiden's sexuality and disruptive influence on hierarchy is especially threatening to the mother. Katherine's grief and rage erupt in

⁵⁴ *The Witch*, directed by Robert Eggers (2015).

⁵⁵ Esther J Kibor, "Witchcraft and Sorcery: A Biblical Perspective with Implications for Church Ministry," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 2 (February 25, 2006): pp. 151-161.

the climax of the film, and Thomasin kills her in an act of self-defense. This could be interpreted as one of many ways society pits women against each other. There is a generational struggle between the maidens and mothers, often portrayed as a fear in mothers of being replaced by their daughters.

While the reality of mother-daughter relationships is not nearly so simple, Western popular culture reduces it to a fear of aging out of one's sexual power, of being replaced, and for this reason there is an entire anti-aging industry worth billions of dollars per year in revenue.⁵⁶ While the other forms of power that are embodied by the mother and crone are abject and outside of the patriarchal structure, the "power" of a desirable maiden is absolutely a part of it. This is what makes beauty and youth so enviable, because in a patriarchal culture that kind of personal currency is a valuable commodity. As maidens age into mothers, that value fades and is replaced with the horror, loneliness, suffering, and sacrifice that comes with motherhood. While mothers gain the power of creating life, it comes at a cost to their cultural value.

Mother as threat to institutions

Other times, the mother is victimized by the witch who is not a maiden, but an institution constructed to deprive her of autonomy. I have discussed at length so far how the construction of motherhood has created a paradox between her marginalized role and its inherent power, and that paradox mostly weighs on the myths of patriarchal culture. So much so that any examination of the mother archetype feels like watching the patriarchy buckle under its own mess of contradictions. This places the mother and any patriarchal institution like religion or academia at odds with one another, where the symbolic power of the mother represents a threat to the

⁵⁶ Lakhimai Mili and S. Victor Anand Kumar, "Semiotic Analysis of Anti-Aging Product Advertisement," *Notions* 7, no. 2 (2016).

underlying ideology of female subservience and inferiority to men. As I mentioned in chapter one, placing women in a primarily mother-focused role was a strategy of primitive accumulation of women's labor put in place to build a new capitalist economy. If the archetypal mother could recover her power to shape society, she could topple Christianity, western philosophical thought up to and including modernism, and capitalism all at once.

Witchcraft shares a lot of iconography with these structures, and in many cases operates as a stand-in for patriarchal institutions, especially Catholicism. Our idea of Satanic witchcraft largely comes from Catholic ideas about witches as they were constructed for the witch hunts. Satanism is regularly depicted as a dark distaff to Catholicism: both worship a male figure, use incense and candles, and have iconographic ties to the occult. In *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the Church of Night is very similar to the Catholic church, and the clergy of the Church of Night is exclusively male, just as in the Catholic church. There's never been a female pope, after all. These semiotic ties between witchcraft and Catholicism, however much they are employed for sake of contrast, they instead comprise a foil: highlighting each other's similarities as much as their differences.

Rosemary's Baby: Tradition vs. Progress

The 1968 psychological thriller *Rosemary's Baby* is an intriguing marriage of these tropes. The film follows the character Rosemary Woodhouse, a young newlywed who slowly discovers over the course of her pregnancy that her husband, neighbors, and doctor are witches and have been conspiring against her to give rise to Satan's spawn. The film explores themes of psychological abuse, religion, patriarchy, and of course, motherhood. It operates remarkably well as a critique of patriarchal culture, an interpretation that I admit is hard to square with the fact that the film's director is famous child rapist Roman Polanski. Regardless, *Rosemary's Baby's*

themes and narrative can be read as a feminist rebuke of misogyny and an exploration of sacrifice, pain, and the role of motherhood in society's most vital institutions.

At the start of the film, Rosemary's husband Guy is a struggling actor. Rosemary plays the supportive wife, reciting to several people his very short resume. But over the course of the film, as Rosemary's pregnancy starts and gets more and more difficult, Guy's career improves drastically. We of course come to learn that Guy has offered his wife to a coven of witches in exchange for personal career success. Just as the father in the waiting room of the maternity ward, Guy passes off the pain, sacrifice, and responsibilities of having a child to his wife while he enjoys social rewards—he meets influential “society” people, gets more attention and acclaim as an actor. Meanwhile his wife suffers: emotionally, physically, and psychologically.

Guy's actions in the film are literally abusive. The term “gaslighting” is a reference to the play *Gaslight*, in which a husband tries to convince his wife that she is losing her mind by lying to her and playing tricks on her. Psychologists have started to use the term to describe a common tactic used by abusers that keeps the victims of abuse under tight psychological control.⁵⁷ It was a term invented to describe exactly what Guy does to Rosemary in this film. Rosemary is very bright and observant. She notices small details, has an excellent memory, and she has a talent for deduction. At regular intervals Rosemary will notice something amiss just for Guy to lie directly to her and pretend it didn't happen. For example, Minnie Castevet, their next-door neighbor, brings over dessert for the Woodhouses and Rosemary notices an unusual “chalky under taste”⁵⁸ as she describes it. Guy completely denies it, tells her explicitly “there is no under taste,” and insists she finish it out of “politeness.” We come to find not long afterward that the dessert was

⁵⁷ “Gaslighting,” Psychology Today (Sussex Publishers), accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/gaslighting>.

⁵⁸ *Rosemary's Baby*, directed by Roman Polanski (1968).

laced, which knocks Rosemary out partially, though she retains a dream-like consciousness throughout. This is the first in a series of physical violations that Guy commits against Rosemary, but the gaslighting started almost immediately after they met their neighbors, the Castevets.

After Rosemary is drugged, she is taken into the neighboring apartment, and the coven of the Castevets, their friends, and Guy all stand in a circle around her, nude. Rosemary is painted with red symbols and then raped by something inhuman. It has claws and cat-like slit pupils. When she awakes in her bed at home, she notices the scratches on her body and before she can ask how she got them, Guy offers this explanation: “I know, I’m sorry, I trimmed them [...]. I didn’t want to miss baby night. It was kind of fun even in a necrophilia sort of way.” Rosemary seems hurt, and it’s clear from her reaction and tone that she views this as a violation. She tells Guy that she dreamed she was being raped by a monster to which he replies, “gee thanks, honey” as a dismissive joke.

During the pregnancy, Guy brings various people from the coven into Rosemary’s life. Soon their entire social circle is made up of the geriatric high-society of New York. Rosemary is manipulated over the course of a one-minute conversation into switching her doctor, and Minnie Castevet immediately calls and makes an appointment for her. The Castevets et al. become intimately involved with every aspect of Rosemary’s pregnancy. They’re the first people Guy wants to tell when Rosemary gives him the news. Rosemary’s new doctor, a close personal friend of the Castevets insists at their first appointment that she not read any books or listen to any of her friends and says that “no two pregnancies are alike.” Slowly, Rosemary’s access to anyone that could help her falls away, purposefully, on behalf of her husband.

Through these relationships emerges a theme of tradition versus modernism; it comments on religious institutions but also presents the modern world as an escape from patriarchy. This makes a lot of sense in historical context: the film was released in 1968, during a Civil Rights movement and a few years before the Roe v. Wade decision, as a feminist groundswell was building. In one direction lie progress toward a more liberated society and in the other, a regressive culture that traps women in object roles with no autonomy and no purpose other than to reproduce. At the start of the film, Rosemary and Guy are a pretty cosmopolitan couple; their first night in the new apartment they eat sitting cross-legged in the empty living room, drinking from beer cans and making love on the floor. Earlier when they were touring the apartment, Guy makes a joke about growing marijuana. They're not very traditional *or* religious. At one point, Rosemary mentions that she was raised Catholic but she doesn't really know now; unlike earlier generations, religion is not at the core of her identity (and Rosemary is, as a young woman, still forming that identity). Before Rosemary gets pregnant, her wardrobe is slightly mod, form-fitting and youthful. But as she and her expected child become more ensconced in the tradition of the Mercato coven next door, her wardrobe becomes *much* more traditional, modest, even frumpy. She gets her hair cut in an ultra-close cut pixie style, mentioning that she got it at "Vidal Sassoon" and that it's "very in," indicating her desire to be connected to the forward-thinking fashion world. Her husband, of course, hates it. The struggle between tradition and modernism is at its most clear when Rosemary decides to give a party for "all of our old, excuse me, all of our *young* friends. It's going to be quite the thing; you have to be under sixty to get in." She insists on not letting any of the Castevets or their friends coming to this party, and the difference between the two types of gatherings is stark.

The people at Rosemary's party are young, diverse, fashionable, and most importantly they care about Rosemary. A group of women notice that she's in pain and takes her into the kitchen so she can cry and tell them what's going on with her pregnancy; they even lock Guy out of the kitchen so Rosemary can have privacy. Rosemary explains that her doctor has been ignoring her pain, telling her for months that it will "go away in a couple days," and that he refuses to give her any real medication. Her friends tell her that the doctor sounds like a quack and that she should go get a second opinion. They affirm her reality and give her confidence to confront Guy and assert herself in how she wants to handle her pregnancy. For the brief moment in the story that Rosemary is able to get support from other women, it almost shatters the illusion Guy and the rest of the coven have been constructing for her for months.

So how do we put all this together? It seems like a lot of disparate themes but in fact they are interconnected, reflecting the interlocking systems of oppression in a hegemonic structure. In *Rosemary's Baby*, the coven represents many things at once: the past, tradition, organized religion, misogyny, traditional gender roles. Ultimately Rosemary is unable to escape these institutions. Her attempt to escape to the modern world through the doctor she originally met with, Dr. Hill, fails because he calls her husband and Dr. Sapirstein ostensibly because he believes that she's having a mental breakdown. Even the modern doctor is inadvertently upholding the rules and traditions of the past that are putting Rosemary in harm's way. At the very end of the film, Roman Castevet implores Rosemary to be a mother to her baby, despite the circumstances of his birth. The ending is ambiguous, but the lingering shot of Rosemary rocking the half-Satan offspring implies that she does in fact serve as a mother to baby Adrian. It's the last image of Rosemary we have, a mother smiling over her child and gently rocking his crib.

The construction of witchcraft as just another patriarchal institution is pretty well limited to depictions of Satanic witches. This is possibly because of the “satanic witch” trope’s semiotic ties to Catholicism. Even in *Rosemary’s Baby*, Catholic imagery appears regularly; Rosemary appears to have traumatic memories about the nuns at her Catholic school, and when she is being raped, she conjures an imagined pope in the room and asks for his forgiveness. Rosemary calls out to God and even prays, but there is no moment in the film where Rosemary’s pleas to God help her and she repeatedly falls victim to the cult of witches. As in the Catholic church, the coven in *Rosemary’s Baby* worships a male deity and the head of the church (Roman Castevet) is a man. Rosemary resists the role the coven wants her to play throughout her pregnancy, trying desperately to escape the limits placed on her diet, social life. However, the call of motherhood claims her in the final moments of the film, implying her failure to escape the repressive traditions of the past.

Conclusion

A recurring joke among feminists is that if men had to go through childbirth, medical science would have dedicated all of its resources to making that process as painless and easy (and with a much better mortality rate) as possible. You’d get knocked out with a tranquilizer and the doctor would deliver the child for you. It would be a simple out-patient procedure and over with in an hour-long appointment. As it turns out, reality has been much less kind to women. Maternal morbidity is at astonishingly high rates across the world, but particularly among the working class and women of color.⁵⁹ The cultural depictions of motherhood and childbirth as magic are not the reality, and despite modern medicine childbirth is dangerous and

⁵⁹ Dovile Vilda et al., “Income Inequality and Racial Disparities in Pregnancy-Related Mortality in the US,” SSM - population health (August 28, 2019), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6734101/>.

potentially fatal, and motherhood is a risk factor for a variety of social problems; almost 25% of unmarried mothers live in poverty.⁶⁰ The social narrative about the lasting strength and capability of mothers has relegated them to a role of having to do more for less, especially as inflation continues to outpace wages and more women are forced to work multiple jobs in addition to their responsibilities at home, where studies have shown they still have an outsized proportion of duties compared to their male partners.⁶¹

Nevertheless, motherhood is demanded of women. Those who cannot or will not become mothers are demonized. These are the women who either feel no obligation to have children or are not capable of doing so. They are also some of the most hated groups of women in our culture: lesbians, post-menopausal women, “libbers,” disabled women, transgender women, abortion rights activists and the list could go on. Women who challenge the role of motherhood and exist outside of it are an existential threat to our social structure.

⁶⁰ Robin Bleiweis et al., “The Basic Facts about Women in Poverty,” *The Center for American Progress*, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/08/03/488536/basic-facts-women-poverty/>

⁶¹ Megan Brennan, “Women Still Handle Main Household Tasks in U.S.,” Gallup.com (Gallup, November 23, 2020), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/283979/women-handle-main-household-tasks.aspx>.

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CHAPTER IV: CRONES

The last stage of the maiden-mother-crone cycle, the crone is represented by the waning period of the moon in some modern witchcraft practices. To neopagans she represents the stage in a woman's life when she is most wise, experienced, and independent. She is economically secure, sometimes living off an inheritance but more likely living off the land, especially if she is a witch. The crone has deep roots in her community and its traditions. The crone's locus of power is her knowledge, experience, and wisdom.

The crone is marked by her noticeably aged appearance; she'll have deep lines in her face, crepe-y skin, veiny arms and hands and sometimes an unkempt appearance. The crone's hair is gray, unbrushed, long and scraggly as though it has not been trimmed in decades. Her nails are overgrown, yellowing, and cracked. Her wardrobe (if she's depicted with any clothes at all; like all witches, the crone is frequently depicted nude) is tattered, torn, and stained. This is the opposite of the glamour and attention to visual pleasure exhibited by maiden-witches. But she has no need for physical beauty; she has cultural knowledge that spans centuries; she understands the ancient traditions and is even considered in many cultures to be a spiritual leader.

There is plenty that is abject about the crone. Her aged appearance paints her as nearer to death, and crones and hags (a term which I will use more or less synonymously with crone) are even geographically marginalized from society. Her home, be it a cabin at the edge of the forest or a large, old Victorian on a lonely street, is on the physical margins of society and serves as a boundary between the enlightened, Christian world of modern society and the primitive, wild unknown of nature. During the development of early Christianity and the witch hunts, elders and wise woman were targeted for execution because they held traditional pagan knowledge, thus

preserving an important link to the world pre-Christianity. As Christianity developed into a worldwide power, pagan practices were persecuted in an effort to convert the recently colonized European tribes and cultures into an evolved, Christian, patriarchal society. The wise women of these pre-Christian cultures were assumed to be witches because of their belief in what the Christians thought to be a primitive belief in magic. As it turns out, before the witch hunts, Christian clergy thought that belief in magic was a sign of how backwards thinking the pagans were.

Of course, the incompatibility of paganism and Christianity creates an unstable social structure, and eventually many European societies gave way to the Christian invasion, and England continued to grow its empire under a hereditary monarchy. In many ways, the ancient knowledge of the crone, coupled with her lived experience, challenges many of the foundational myths at the heart of the hegemonic structure that sprung from England's world domination efforts.

Unlike maidens and mothers, crones are almost exclusively depicted in popular culture as being witches. The idea of a crone is nearly synonymous with the hag-witch. For our purposes it's needless to distinguish between a crone and a crone-witch, as I have for the other two archetypes. While the maiden-witch and the mother-witch are twists on existing female stereotypes, the crone is singular and inextricable from the witch. She is what most people think of when they imagine a witch: the old woman with the pointy black hat who lives in the woods to feast on children. But the crone is more than that. Because of her wisdom and experience, the crone is also blessed with cunning, and is often depicted as manipulating innocent people to get her way. We fear a maiden's sexual power, a mother's power to give life, and the crone's power of *knowing*. The crone has a memory that stretches back before the establishment of the current

social order and a skill for healing that pre-dates medicine. She has no need for society to protect her, because she is a force of nature.

In Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* the witch is a designation on her own⁶²—that's how frequently she appears as a character in Western folklore. Crones appear so frequently in witch media that we've encountered two crones already in this analysis while discussing the other archetypes: Minnie Castevet from *Rosemary's Baby* and the hag from *The Witch*. Famous crones from pop culture include Baba Yaga, the hag of Slavic folklore, though she has come to be known around the world in children's stories and even Hollywood film releases.⁶³ The crone is, as most witches, a contradictory figure. She is as respected as a wise woman as she is repulsive. She is cunning, manipulative, and even malevolent, but she is not the same unambiguous evil that a satanic witch represents. The crone is presented more as a force of nature, and a representation of its cruel indifference to humanity. While the mother archetype constructs nature as a source of abundance and giving, the crone represents the darkness, pain, and suffering that awaits a person who has strayed too far from the safe harbor of human society. In this, she represents the liminal boundary between society and nature; in fact, that is often where she lives: deep in the woods, off the beaten path.

Baba Yaga is a classic example of a crone. She is cruel, manipulative, self-interested, and hideous. In *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale*, Andreas Johns investigates the link between Baba Yaga and ambiguity writing that “although Baba Yaga is overwhelmingly a villain and East Slavic folktales and functions as a focus for a variety of negative emotions felt toward the maternal image, her ambiguity shows that she cannot be

⁶² Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, (Univeristy of Texas Press, Austin, 2009).

⁶³ *Hellboy*, directed by Neil Marhsall (2019). Baba Yaga is a character in this film, complete with her home on chicken legs.

constructed as an entirely evil Other.”⁶⁴ Johns argues in part that her role in the folktale shifts from villain to donor to hostile donor, where she is sometimes there to help the protagonist and give them something on their quest, but not always willingly or kindly. Johns word “Other” here is particularly instructive in this analysis of investigating the relationship of witches to the abject. “The Other” refers to the social phenomena of “othering,” where groups will associate negative characteristics with an out-group to solidify the boundaries of the in-group. It is an extension of the binary mode of our social structure, just as the subject/object dynamic is. The fact that Baba Yaga’s usefulness and malice make her difficult to class as either good subject or evil object is the essence of abjection.

The crone is persistent in her abjection. She resembles living death, cutting a repulsive figure. She is skeletal and has skin that sags and maybe even rots in patches like a corpse. Her eyes may be foggy with cataracts, and her teeth and nails are yellowed and generally uncared for. Her hands have thin skin, raised veins, arthritic swelling around the joints, and may be covered in warts. The association between these signs of aging and horror is borne in part through the hag. Dawn Keetley in “The Shock of Aging (Women) In Horror Film” argues that the body of the aging woman portrayed for shock is a response to the cultural trauma of aging:

In recent horror films, the spectacle of bodies being dismembered has been supplemented by the old woman, filmed in such a way that she provides those visceral and emotional shocks. This figure, this visual effect, contains [...] the existential experience of aging as shock [...], the fear of old *women* in particular as repositories of dread about mortality, and the collective cultural anxiety about the increasing numbers of elderly in the United

⁶⁴ Andreas Johns, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale* (Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 2010), 138.

States. The visual practice of old-woman-as-shock is substituted for bodily mutilations

[...]: indeed, both forms trade in the horrific deformation of the healthy, youthful body.⁶⁵

In keeping with the anxiety about aging, the crone is presented as a direct threat to youth. Crones desire youth in one way or another. Some hags desire to be young, and will either disguise themselves as youthful, as is the case with Melisandre the Red Witch in HBO's *Game of Thrones* and the wicked witches in *Oz, the Great and Powerful*, or she will try to consume youth, either literally or metaphorically. They are associated with cannibalizing children or using parts of children's bodies to make spells and potions. The hag's hostility to youth is a metaphor for the feeling of unease Western culture has about aging; the existence of old age tells us that youth ends and reminds us of the slow process of a body's decay. The crone does not signify death, she signifies the space between life and death where one is alive but approaching the threshold between this world and the next. That, according to Kristeva, is what causes the repulsion—the pulling of oneself away from that border: “imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”⁶⁶

The most disturbing thing about the crone is how comfortable she is living on that border, in that abject space. Her appearance, her actions, her geography all reveal an indifference to what society demands of women. Thus she can represent a fully liberated woman. She is fully liberated from the social conventions of womanhood and can survive, even thrive, without them. The 2020 film *Gretel and Hansel* interrogate this dynamic, using the crone as an almost aspirational figure for true freedom, while never straying from the origins of the character.

⁶⁵ Dawn Keetley, “The Shock of Aging (Women) in Horror Film,” *Elder Horror* (McFarland, Jefferson, 2019), 66.

⁶⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1984), 3-4

A Crone's Tale: *Gretel and Hansel*

January of 2020 saw the release of *Gretel and Hansel*, a retelling of the classic folktale where two children encounter a witch in the woods who fattens them up to eat them. The original folktale is intact, but with important additions: there's an emphasis on Gretel's character and more attention paid to the motivations of the witch. The witch, Holda, played by Alice Krige is a perfect crystallization of the crone archetype. Holda's abject appearance, her intense independence, and her ruthless self-interest are the defining characteristics of her character, three characteristics that the crone has exhibited for centuries. The film also explores the shadow of the mother archetype that the crone sometimes represents by making her a mentor, a "hostile donor" as Johns puts it,⁶⁷ to Gretel.

The crone as the maiden's mentor

Gretel and Hansel explores the entire triad, with a maiden on a path of self-discovery in the form of Gretel, and long-suffering mother whose madness sets the plot in motion introduced before Holda, the crone and antagonist, appears. Gretel has been updated for the 2020 version. She is now a witch herself—she's precognitive and has a strongly developed sense of intuition. She cares for her younger brother, Hansel, who questions her judgment at frequent intervals. Gretel's emergent power as a witch is the primary motivation for Holda keeping the two children alive as long as she does. Holda senses Gretel's powers, and she has a level of respect for Gretel that she does not for Hansel, or really any other children or people who aren't witches. Holda feels a kinship with Gretel, and this kinship motivates her to reveal aspects of the truth to Gretel, and to try to convince her to exchange her attachment to Hansel for power and freedom.

⁶⁷ Johns, *Baba Yaga: Ambiguous Mother*, 138.

In most texts, Holda's actions would be framed as devilish, whispering lies into the ear of our protagonist and trying to steer her towards evil. And Holda is definitely a villain in this text as well. She creates the abundance of food in the house by disguising rotted scraps and the body parts of dead children. She tries to convince Gretel to eat her brother, and in the climax, Gretel kills Holda to save Hansel. But while Holda is framed as a villain, she is not framed as *wrong*. Gretel saves Hansel, but then she sends him away so she can grow as her own person without having him as a responsibility or burden. And the optimistic final monologue implies that this was absolutely the right choice for Gretel, and her fingers turn black, just as Holda's were, as she becomes a witch.

I would like to emphasize that *Gretel and Hansel* is not Holda's story, it's Gretel's. Gretel is a maiden; in fact, she is literally referred to as a maiden by another character in one of the early scenes. And the story does follow maiden-witch conventions: Gretel tries to gain autonomy in a cruel, patriarchal world, and has to come into power as a witch to escape that fate. This is not the first time that crones have been sidelined and villainized. This trope is the least common of the three to be a protagonist, and the most frequently villainized. The fear of aging and the elderly in Western culture is deeply embedded, and crones express the worst of those fears: death, decay, and the danger of an independent, smart, and cruel woman. She is a character that men in particular find very difficult to identify with because she represents the abject underbelly of their experience, and therefore she does not fit the mold for an acceptable protagonist. Even when she is a good witch, she is not the protagonist but merely a helper.

Holda is a strange blend of these two functions of the crone. She is Gretel's antagonist, but also her fairy godmother in a way. Holda teaches Gretel her first spell and her first potion, a sleeping draft. Holda introduces Gretel to witchcraft and helps her on her journey of self-

discovery. Holda is never portrayed as good, but her knowledge and understanding of the world holds infallible wisdom, and notably, her wisdom sets another woman free.

Holda shows Gretel the benefit of living free of men, giving her a complete command of reality and nature. When they first meet, Gretel calls her “missus,” to which Holda replies, “Missus? You think I’m married? Do you see a ball and chain on my foot?”⁶⁸ Holda shows contempt, distrust, and disrespect of male figures, including the young Hansel. She undermines his importance to Gretel, and when he goes missing, she ponders to Gretel whether she’s better off without him, calling him a “burden” to her. She calls Hansel a poison to Gretel, an obsession that keeps her tied down, and explains that it’s unfair to put his needs before her own. Eventually this is what Gretel does, and she stays in the woods to explore her new power independently. Her function in the narrative is as a foil for the maiden, and she reveals Gretel’s dark side as well as points out Gretel’s true, but buried, feelings.

Gretel shows indications of a rebellious side kept in check by her politeness and her need for secure food and shelter. When Gretel meets Holda, her path is taking her into unfulfilling and humiliating roles to raise and support her little brother. Gretel’s mother has lost her mind and kicked the children out, leaving Gretel to apply for jobs as a “housekeeper,” but always with implications of sex work as well. A potential employer asks her if her “maidenhood” is “intact,”⁶⁹ and the helpful hunter tells her where she can learn about herbs unless “the men find a more obvious use for you.” Gretel resists these roles; she is not willing to trade her sexual autonomy away, even for the safety of her brother which she claims to hold above all else. Holda is able to recognize and address Gretel’s doubts, and Gretel is able to empathize with Holda’s

⁶⁸ *Gretel and Hansel*, directed by Oz Perkins, 2020.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

perspective. Holda's wisdom and understanding are what make her insidious—she does not persuade with lies, but with the truth.

The frightening wisdom of the hag

“Women sometimes know things they’re not supposed to.”⁷⁰ This is what Holda says in response to Hansel’s question about how she knows there’s going to be a storm if there are no storm clouds. Holda, of course, has a more intimate connection to the earth, and a different relationship to time because she is a witch. We have touched on the semiotic relationship between femininity and nature several times in this analysis, and Holda is a part of that tradition. She tells Gretel that the two of them can “commune with the great provider,”⁷¹ implying the existence of a deity that makes gestures toward the earth as a generous, giving force. Crones are expected to have an ethereal knowledge and power over nature; this too is a symptom of a binary, a supposed divide between the rational, scientific male and the irrational, mystical female. The crone is frightening because her knowledge defies explanation, her conclusions are both irrational *and true*. One of the earliest pieces of advice that Holda gives Gretel in an attempt to unlock her powers is “think less, and know more.”⁷² The talent of a witch is her ability to know without thinking, without using the logical processes that our current world demands. The crone is a representative for a disruptive epistemology. Precognition is one of the canonical traits of witches in the *Gretel and Hansel* and it is deployed in a feminist allegory to represent “women’s intuition,” the supposed sixth sense that women have. Francis P. Cholle describes intuition as “a process that gives us the ability to know something directly without analytic reasoning, bridging the gap between the conscious and nonconscious parts of our mind, and also

⁷⁰ *Gretel and Hansel*, directed by Oz Perkins, 2020.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

between instinct and reason.”⁷³ Intuition is a phenomenon that people of all genders experience, but because women are seen as the more emotional, more irrational of the genders, they are seen also as being over reliant on intuition over logic. The crone’s intuition expresses the fear beneath that myth that intuition is an unexplainable power that could be weaponized against the logical order of the culture. In *Gretel and Hansel*, it is utilized in reverse, presented as a dangerous but liberating ability that a woman can access and use to gain her freedom.

Conclusion

Why can the crone not have her own story? Why has she been cast forever as a villain or at best, a supporting character, usually to a maiden? It could be in part that Western culture rarely centers the voices of elderly women, while the voices of old men (but really just old white men) are the dominant voices controlling business, media, and government in the Western world. A study of German, French, British, and American films that 0% of leading roles in 2019 went to women over 50.⁷⁴ It could also be because the crone is so deeply abject that it’s difficult to portray her as a positive figure. I chose to write about *Gretel and Hansel* because it is one of few texts that explores the character of the hag witch; there is more to Holda than meets the eye, and her dual role in the film as antagonist and mentor illuminate some of the layered applications of the hag in media.

Nevertheless, the persistence of the crone archetype and the overall trend of disgust towards her means that our understanding of elderly women’s bodies is tainted. The wickedness and cruelty of the crone coupled with graphic, frightening depictions of her body marginalize older women.

⁷³ Francis Cholle, “What Is Intuition, And How Do We Use It?” *Psychology Today*, August 31, 2011, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-intuitive-compass/201108/what-is-intuition-and-how-do-we-use-it>.

⁷⁴ Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media, “Frail, Frumpy, and Forgotten: A report on the movie roles of women of age,” 2019, <https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/frail-frumpy-and-forgotten-report.pdf>.

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CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

This project has been re-designed and re-structured more times than I care to count. Here, at the end, I find myself with much more to say on this topic. I initially intended to briefly mention the maiden-mother-crone dynamic in a section about archetypes, but I ended up borrowing its structure to organize some of the sub-themes I was noticing while analyzing texts. Witches are always abject, but in different ways, and different kinds of witches will represent different kinds of women, at different stages in life, with different priorities.

The interlocking myths that comprise misogyny as an ideology are complex and varied, and sometimes in the study of female representation in popular culture it feels like there is a long list of things that women on screen can be, and yet there is this homogeneity in female portrayal that permeates popular culture. I think that using these broad archetypes as a jumping off point helped to subcategorize the broader types of portrayals of women and try to identify broader themes. I also set out to write about witches and the female body specifically. The maiden-mother-crone triad happened to capture the three most obviously mystified representations of the female body: the female body as sexual object, the pregnant female body, and the aging female body. These archetypes also make frequent appearances in popular culture about witches. Witches can capture beliefs about the female body that are unspeakable, gross, painful, or horrifying. Witches made their home in the horror genre, where they exposed the disgusting or shameful parts of the body and committed heinous acts, like consuming children. They appeared in folktales to serve as a cautionary tale not to stray too far from what is known—the questions that we don't have answers to cannot be tolerated by the rational order of society. They're set aside, and that knowledge is guarded by a witch, ready to weaponize it against her victims. Witches have dominated the post-feminist teen culture space, serving as aspirational role models

for young girls, encouraging them to take their power. Witches sometimes even take the reverse role, representing old and powerful institutions.

Why do these tasks fall to witches? Witches do not represent women, at least, not strictly. They do, however, tend to represent social attitudes and fears about women and their bodies. Sometimes witches are just that: flat reproductions of misogynist stereotypes made for entertainment. More interesting though are the ways that feminist texts have reclaimed the image of the witch, using those very stereotypes to challenge the hegemonic structure that built them. The three primary texts for this thesis: *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *Rosemary's Baby*, and *Gretel and Hansel* are, in my view, feminist texts that utilize the abjection of the female body to question male dominance.

Witches, in their embrace of the abject, in their embrace of the set an example of how women can retake power in a society that denies them. It is the example set by the most powerful women in fiction. Their understanding of their place in the world, or rather their place outside of constructed reality, is a liberation from the boundaries of society. Throughout this analysis I've noted how the ways that men have affirmed their place in a hegemonic structure have paradoxically created myths that, if examined under any scrutiny, expose its contradictions. In the course of this study, I've found that the abjection of the witch is what most closely resembles both these myths and their deconstruction. These are the ugly parts of womanhood, and of culture, that are "thrust aside in order [for it] to live," to borrow phrasing from Kristeva.⁷⁵

There are dozens of avenues from here for further research. A more comprehensive understanding of the mother-maiden-crone triad would require a combination of ethnographic study, qualitative and quantitative textual analysis of popular culture, and even an examination of

⁷⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

gender roles from a historical perspective. The version of the trope that I've outlined in this thesis is a marriage of the neopagan Triple Goddess and existing character archetypes for women and witches in popular culture, but all aspects of this version need interrogation and defining on a more detailed level. There is also the issue of intersectionality: do these tropes exist in some form in non-Western cultures? How do the tropes change when a woman of color is at the center? And where are the transgender witches? Some of these questions I intend to personally pursue, and with others, I hardly think myself qualified to answer.

Considering this is my master's thesis I would have loved to come to some concrete answers at the end. It would have been immensely satisfying to tie this project up with a bow and have the question be settled. I think that such a definite ending to an examination of some of popular culture's most ambiguous figures would have been a betrayal, though. Witches deserve more study and bearing in mind the trends in popular culture recently, as the "witch aesthetic" gains more popularity online, as more films and television shows are made about witches, as more people in the world become witches themselves through spiritual practice, I think they will get it.

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