

WITCHES NOW AND THEN: THE IMAGE OF A WITCH AND DIFFERENCES IN THE PERCEPTION OF FEMALE WITCHES DURING SIXTEENTH, SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES AND NOWADAYS

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The popular contemporary culture tends to depict a witch as an “unpleasant and ugly woman,” usually with a long nose and wrinkled face (*Cambridge Dictionary*). Jane P. Davidson argues that “Our stereotype of the witch today is an elderly woman with facial warts and a big nose. She has scraggly hair and a pointed hat and goes around on a broom” (57). This image is probably derived from former depictions of witches as isolated from the society old women and uncanny behaving women. Nevertheless, in the course of time, such negative images of witches, very prominent in the culture, started to change and witches have begun to be perceived as strong and confident women, aware of their powers and position in the society. Along with this process, witches also came to be divided into “good” and the “bad:” the ones who used their magical powers to help others or bring misfortune on them. Such mixed portrayals are visible in films, comic books and books.¹ In the pop culture of the twenty and twenty first century, the image of a witch tends to be exaggerated and humorous, treating magic as a powerful but not serious faculty.

The similar account cannot be associated with the image of a witch from the sixteenth and seventeenth century when supernatural powers preoccupied people strongly, “. . . witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries, flourished. Beliefs in evil or demonic supernatural entities and events were a large component of European art and literature. Many books were written on the dark side subjects of devils, witches, ghosts, possession, exorcism, and black magic” (Davidson 1). At that time people attributed misfortunes to evil powers and anyone suspected of having connections with witchcraft was

¹ Some of the examples can be found in films: *The Witches* from 1990 presenting both good and bad characters, *Season of the Witch* from 2011 presenting devilish image of a witch or *Bewitched* from 2005 and *Maleficent* from 2014 introducing witch as a good character; comic books: *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* 1971, *Wendy the Little Good Witch* 1954; books: *Harry Potter* (1997-2007), *Wyrd Sisters* (1988).

blamed and severely punished (Mackay 97). Warnings against witches would appear in various studies and dissertations. It entailed detailed instructions of how to detect a witch, and what their powers, customs and practices were. As Davidson points in her work *The Dark Side of European Culture, 1400–1700* “[t]he interest in such topics persisted as is indicated by a very large number of books on the supernatural . . .” (2). Moreover, the black magic was considered to be a serious problem in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and even if “. . . a witch could be an amusing figure . . . she was nonetheless perceived as a real person to be avoided and feared” (Davidson 67). The existence of witches was supposed to be treated as a serious threat even if this topic occurred in the cultural discourse and among areas associated with entertainment.

The meaning of the word “witch” has changed significantly throughout the years. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries “[w]itches were thought to be a virulent menace not only to the Christian faith but also to the orderly progress of society and humanity itself . . . By definition, a witch [was] a Christian who had eschewed God and become a worshipper of the Devil . . .” (Davidson 58-59). Accordingly, women accused of witchcraft were treated as a threat to the society, menace to people and enemy with regard to religion. Even though even today it is possible to encounter similar opinions, modern societies treat this phenomenon in a less solemn way. Davidson further states that “[p]eople still believed in witches as late as the 18th century in some parts of Europe, and . . . these beliefs eventually evolved into romantic lore and fiction as well as art and folkloric studies” (11). Nowadays, the literary and cultural presentations of female witches may vary, including the “traditional” descriptions and modern visualizations of “good witches.” Following the theme of describing a witch, a question may arise how people could identify a witch and why only women were accused of worshipping devil? In the translation of *The Hammer of Witches* – the so called “witch-hunter’s manual” (*Malleus Maleficarum*) from 1487, various accusations of women being easy to delude can be found:

There are others who give different reasons for why women are found to be superstitious in larger numbers than men, and they say that there are three reasons. The first is that they are prone to believing and because the demon basically seeks to corrupt the Faith, he assails them in particular. (. . .) The second reason is that on account of the tendency of their temperament towards flux they are by nature more easily impressed upon to receive revelations through the impression of the disembodied spirits (. . .) The third reason is that they have loose tongues and can hardly conceal from their female companions the things that they know through evil art, and since they lack physical strength, they readily seek to avenge themselves secretly through acts of sorcery. (*The Hammer of Witches* 164)

In *The Hammer of Witches*, three main reasons are provided for which these were mainly women who were blamed for practising witchcraft. First of them is the fact that women were supposed to be easily persuaded and naive, thus, it could have been easier for the devil to delude them. Secondly, women's temper was supposed to serve as useful to evil powers. The third reason designated women as physically frail and vindictive, and even prone to "offer children to the demons." It seems that women's behaviour was meticulously observed, analysed and interpreted against them. Even though men who could have been also accused of witchcraft, these were mainly women to whom, the causes for all the wrongdoings and misfortunes were assigned. Another of many justifications to why women were mainly held responsible for contacts with the black magic, was that they were considered to be more deceivable and easily-led than men. Everything fell on, as many claimed, "weak" and "easy to persuade" women (*Daemonologie* n.p.). These theories, as can be seen above, found support in many studies, where it was thoroughly described how to recognise a witch, how to defend against one, and why it is particularly women who are customarily involved in alleged sinister deeds. What is more, in *Daemonologie*, written in 1597 by King James VI of Scotland, the image of a witch was thoroughly described along with the reasons for which these were mostly women predisposed to become one:

What can be the cause that there are twentie women given to that craft, where ther is one man?

EPI. The reason is easie, for as that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Devill, as was over well proved to be true, by the Serpents deceiving of Eva at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe sinsine. (n.p)

This dissertation, published in a form of conversation between two characters – Epistemon and Philomathes, endorses the fact that women were perceived as "sinful sex," as "frailer" than men and, as it was believed, it was easier for the devil to delude them. Furthermore, the study draws upon an example of Eve being deceived by the devil in the Garden of Eden. This was supposed to underline the gullibility and shortcomings of women, their inferiority to men and the moment of becoming the sinful sex. As mentioned before, it was claimed that women were the "weak sex," they were assumed to be more susceptible to devil's tricks. Thus, in the light of the above, women were viewed as the threat to the society, to people's lives and their safety. As it was stated in *Compendium Maleficarum* from 1608 – another discourse on how to detect a witch – ". . . since women have less power of reasoning and less wisdom, it is easier for the devil to delude them . . ." (qtd. in Davidson 48). Due to this publication, the position of women in the society was even more

diminished than before. In the referred to book, women were described as weak and unwise, and they had to live in the uncertainty whether they would be accused of witchcraft or not. What is more, claiming that a woman was undoubtedly inferior by her gender was confining to her social position. During the witch-hunt period women were perceived as corrupted and weak, but it was not only their alleged weakness that made them considered to be prone of becoming an evil witch. Moreover, women who lived in inferior and disadvantaged conditions, whose physical appearance could cast doubts, who were underprivileged and deprived or lived alone – could all be put under suspicion. Accordingly, following this line of thinking, the similar literary representation of a witch's image can be found in "The Witch of Edmonton." In this play, written by John Ford William Rowley and Thomas Dekker, Mother Sawyer, accused of witchcraft, describes herself as follows:

And why on me? why should the envious world
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?
'Cause I am poor, deformed, and ignorant,
And like a bow buckled and bent together
By some more strong in mischiefs than myself,
Must I for that be made a common sink
For all the filth and rubbish of men's tongues
To fall and run into? (n.p)

In the cited passage, it is reflected how Mother Sawyer expresses her disbelief at the fact that everybody could "throw malice upon" her. She claims that because she may behave oddly and look meagre, all wrongdoings are assigned to her. She is an example of an alienated and peculiar-looking woman who is accused by the society on the basis of her appearance or behaviour. She also describes how all the "rubbish of men's tongues" would fall upon her. Mother Sawyer is constantly ridiculed and her every move is analysed. Her physical appearance is considered to be a clear, visible and sufficient indication of being a witch. Her case related in the play is another aspect of female's alleged inferiority and confinement in the stereotypes during that time.

What should also be stressed is the fact that the above mentioned play was written in 1621, and it renders the behaviour of an alleged witch, her appearance and misdeeds. One can find there how the woman eager to find revenge, enters a pact with the devil. It is no surprising that the concept of a female who maintains contacts with the devil was widely spread. As can be seen, people supported such beliefs not only in theoretical manuals but also in plays that were supposed to entertain. However, these were not only old, underprivileged or disfigured (i.e. toothless) women who may have felt

excluded from the society during the medieval times. In Europe, these were also the cases of young and good-looking women who could be accused of witchcraft (Davidson 194). A typical witch was believed to enter into a pact with the devil, take part in nocturnal meetings, recant Christianity and so identified a witch was rejected, interrogated and subjected to punishment (Davidson 57). Women considered as being witches were accused of many wrong-doings: causing natural disasters, bringing misfortune to other people, stealing (even male members), and causing diseases. The critic argues that

Witches provided explanations for the occurrence and excuses for many common human conditions and problems. If your crops failed, or your cows threw stillborn calves, if your house burnt down or your spouse was sexually unresponsive, if you were very sick, sterile, or worse yet, if you gave birth to a deformed baby, these events could be explained by pointing to the activities of witches. Witches could be responsible for illnesses and calamities of many sorts. They could kill as well. Some demonologists postulated that witches could command devils to possess individuals, although some theologians did not agree with this. (Davidson 63)

People wanted to defend themselves against evil powers and their ignorance led to the death of thousands of innocent victims. In England between 1644 and 1647, only under the command of a famous witch-finder, Matthew Hopkins, about 230 alleged female witches were investigated and subsequently killed (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Any kind of deviation and assumed connection with magic was stigmatised. Women in suspicion were tortured, forced to confess and to point out other purported witches. What is more, there were different ways of detecting insalubrious women. As argued earlier, witches were identified by their different physical appearance, by being unpleasant, acting odd and even by their living in isolation. There were also other manners of distinguishing them. They ranged from tossing bounded women into water and checking whether they would sink or float, burning their houses or searching for devil's marks on their bodies (*Daemonologie* n.p.). Women accused of witchcraft were also questioned about their relationship with evil powers. While women did not want to plead guilty to having anything in common with the devil, they were forced to confess and after tortures and after obtaining the coveted testimony, they were sentenced to death.

If the judge's aim is to investigate whether she is enveloped in the sorcery of silence, he should note whether she can cry when standing in his presence or being exposed to torture . . . The third precaution to be taken in the present Step Eleven is that the hair should be shaved from every part of the body. The reasoning is the same as in the stripping off of the clothing above. For the

sorcery of silence they sometimes keep superstitious amulets consisting of certain objects in their clothing or in the hair of the body or sometimes in the most secret places, which cannot be named. (*The Hammer of Witches* 549-552)

Some of these stereotypes moved far to the twenty and twenty first century. As indicated previously, even nowadays various films, books and even theatre plays about witches are produced and still, it is rare to encounter male representations of sorcerers. Nevertheless, contemporarily, witches started being represented more often as independent and self-sufficient women. What is more, the images of good witches appeared in the media and they have altered the “old” notion of females who have connections with black magic. It can be definitely stated that Sabrina, the main character from the comic book series (and later on – TV series) *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1971), is not presented as a maleficent woman but as a friendly witch who uses magic powers in order to do good. The same applies to *Wendy the Little Good Witch* (1954) – a young witch who wishes people well, and she has nothing in common with the black magic or evil powers. The “deep-rooted” visualization of a witch, with a wrinkled face and a warted nose, started to be ridiculed. Moreover, it seems that these kinds of witches are nowadays presented as clumsy, unfortunate and are less often associated with frightening events (i.e. in *The Witches* movie from 1990 where “bad witches” have no luck and are defeated by good powers). Furthermore, bad witches are almost always juxtaposed with their good equivalents and these are the good witches who celebrate the victory over their dreadful opponents.

In today’s world, apart from the physical appearance, it is very often the identification as a feminist which is described as related to “witches.” Feminists are very often thought to look like “old-time witches,” they are believed to despise men and their actions are frequently criticised by the society. People tend to associate their objectives with rebellion and with standing out from the rest of the society, just as in the case of medieval witches. Such a similarity was raised in 1960’s in the United States when several manifesting groups united under the name W.I.T.C.H., that is *Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell*. Their manifesto was referring directly to the ideology of witches:

... It’s an awareness that witches and gypsies were the original guerrillas and resistance fighters against oppression – particularly the oppression of women – down through the ages. Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, nonconformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary. (This possibly explains why nine million of them have been burned.). (qtd. in Wessinger 177)

Women belonging to this society compared themselves to medieval witches – oppressed and suppressed by the society, confined within the expected norms. They believed that beginning from the sixteenth century, women were punished because of being “intelligent, curious and independent.” They suggested that for women being revolutionary meant being criticised. They underlined the oppression of women and the need for equality of both genders, which could result in “truly cooperative society” (177).

Even though the idea of a “good witch” exists in the modern consciousness, the image of a “bad witch” is still prevalent. As mentioned previously, witches are portrayed in movies, plays or books. They are usually described as women who are dressed in black and who wield the evil powers. However, it should be stressed that the word “witch” has a completely different meaning than one may think. While searching for its definition in the dictionary, one can find various denotations such as: “a woman who is supposed to have evil or wicked magical powers” or “a person who uses a divining rod” (*Dictionary.com*). Nevertheless, the true meaning of this word is a “wise woman,” a woman who has the knowledge and intelligence. Maybe a woman who knows more than she should? Who behaves in accordance with her own decisions but against the requirements of the society? During the witch-hunt women were confined to the idea of an evil witch, often without the possibility to defend themselves. They were thought to be unwise and weak. Here, the true meaning of the word witch may occur: a woman too wise to be accepted by the society.

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