

Dissenting Voices

Volume 6 | Issue 1

9-7-2017

A Feminist Perspective on the History of Women as Witches

Maggie Rosen
mrose5@u.brockport.edu

Recommended Citation

Rosen, Maggie (2017) "A Feminist Perspective on the History of Women as Witches," *Dissenting Voices*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/dissentingvoices/vol6/iss1/5>

This Opening Voices is brought to you for free and open access by the Women and Gender Studies at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissenting Voices by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.



A Feminist Perspective on the History of Women as Witches

This paper explores the ways that women have been deemed witches throughout history. Salem, 1692, was a heightened time for witch accusations. The women accused left a mark on history and their identities became the mainstream stereotype of witches seen in media and pop culture. Transgressive women and women in power are called witches in contemporary United States as they were hundreds of years ago. The witch image is used to reinforce gender inequality and marginalize women who push back against our patriarchal society.

Introduction

On June 18, 2015, my girlfriend and I drove to Salem on a whim succeeding a five-day beach vacation in Cape Cod to celebrate my birthday. We stayed no more than three hours in that tiny town and most of it was spent finding parking and looking for a bathroom. As someone who has always felt a particular allure towards mysticism and new age literature I was expecting to feel the ground tremble below my feet as I stepped into the graveyard that held so many of the women and “co-conspirators” persecuted for suspicion of witchcraft. Instead, all I felt was the judgment of a nearby tour group as their guide scolded us for listening in without having purchased tickets. As we walked around, I was disturbed by how little of this small town was authentic. Plastic bobble

heads of green witches stared back at me as I gazed into the numerous spell shop windows that claimed to be the "real deal." The trip left me thinking three things: I could now check Salem off of my bucket list of places to visit, "Crap, now we won't get home until four a.m.", and why are we capitalizing on centuries of the wrongful persecution and brutal murder of so many women?

Even as time progresses, there are contemporary issues that exemplify the oppressions women in the 17th century faced. During the 1650s in New England, English Quakers began to integrate female spiritual leaders into their churches, believing that anyone, regardless of gender, could teach the divine truth (Karlsen, 1989). Puritans rejected such inclusion and branded female spiritual leaders as witches who needed to be exterminated. And still today, women who hold positions of power and mastery are methodically suppressed by patriarchal societies. In 2011, Julia Gillard was elected as the first female prime minister in Australia. A rally erupted. T-shirts and flyers were distributed with images that depicted Gillard as a witch: an old, haggard, flaming witch on a broomstick. This was a blatant display of misogyny and ageism. Gillard was slandered with

pejorative rhetoric such as "bitch" and "ditch the witch," a direct threat to her gender identity upholding an authoritative position (Petherbridge, 2015). There is a long history of women in power being discredited and persecuted that is particularly visible in early modern British America during the Salem witch-hunts. Contemporary witch-hunts exist in spaces where women hold positions of power or possess similar characteristics to that of the women who were deemed witches centuries ago. This essay examines the Salem, Massachusetts, witch hunts of 1692 by looking at ways the witch image can be used to reinforce gender inequality and marginalize women who push back against patriarchal societies.

A Brief History of Spirituality in British America

The bible says, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18, King James Version). These words were a way of life for the Puritans living in New England during the 17th century. The people of Puritan faith lived their lives in total devotion and worship. Any occurrence, be it significant or minute, was believed to be willed by god. Some people, referred to as "cunning folk," possessed abilities that could only be explained by the supernatural. This was

not a rare phenomenon. In fact, it was commonplace to have many cunning folks in a community. They acted as community healers for the sick, were able to see the future, and could cast protection and good fortune for those in need (Godbeer, 2013). This was not seen as a threat to the church when practiced with good intention.

While most cunning folk practiced a set of rather benign skills, others were accused of using their supernatural abilities with malice by wielding power through the occult. This mastery was called witchcraft. The Puritan clergy believed that the people who practiced witchcraft were possessed or doing the devil's work. Any suspicion of bewitchment was automatically blamed on the cunning folk of that community. Due to a close proximity and familiarity the townspeople had with one another, it was easy to accuse a neighbor of witchcraft when situations went awry. People who grew sicker or died in the care of a cunning folk healer were considered to have been bewitched (Godbeer, 2013). It became precarious to practice healing of any sort as the paradigm of healers-as-witches took root.

Salem, Massachusetts, during the 17th century, was a heightened time in American history for witch accusations.

Any misfortune, illness, or deviance was foremost suspected to be a result of witchcraft.

Not All Women Are Created Equal

The treatment of Puritan women (and women today) is rooted in biblical times. Richard Godbeer (2011), author and professor with a special interest in Early American witchcraft, explains,

Eve's legacy as the female prototype was double-edged: on the one hand, she served as a successful helpmeet in the Garden of Eden; on the other, she was Satan's first human ally. Eve was worthy of honor as Adam's companion prior to their fall from grace, but her disobedience to God at the Devil's bidding made her the first witch (p. 13).

The story of Eve, the original sinner, was projected onto women living in the Puritan society. Women were "worthy of honor" for being wives but deemed witches if they disrupted their functionality in society.

There was no discrimination based on gender when it came to having supernatural abilities and there are no records to indicate that more women than men practiced witchcraft. The discrepancy lies in the accusations and convictions of witches. This disparity can be explained by the compulsory gender norms of the Puritan society and

the women who defied them (Godbeer, 2013). In other words, the reinforcement of the strict gender roles (i.e., women as mothers, caretakers, and homemakers) made it easy to target the women who stepped outside of their assigned role. Powerful women and/or women who transgressed the boundaries of the gender binary were seen as an evil. Female bodies, as the weaker sex and descendants of Eve, were more vulnerable to “the Devil’s influence” (Godbeer, p. 11, 2011). Having little autonomy and agency, women were easy targets for blame.

Puritan women existed as a means to an end. The “means” being faithful wives, mothers, companions, and caretakers, and the “end” being obedient, devout Puritan children. Women who defied this role were seen as “Servants of Satan” (Godbeer, p. 397, 2013). A woman’s transgressive behaviors could only be explained by possession of the devil. The “good” women who remained subservient and holy were seen as “handmaids of the lord” (Godbeer, p. 397, 2013). The church considered women to be a “necessary good,” needed for the Puritan way of life (Godbeer, p. 396, 2013). Women were dichotomized as either the “necessary good” or a witch. The polarity between the two was

frightening in that it created room for women to incriminate other women. As Godbeer (2013) points out, “women as well as men internalized the claim that women were more vulnerable to the devil’s influence. As women accused other women, they participated in the negative assumption about their own sex” (p. 397). Women disparaging other women are common in patriarchal societies. The cry of misogyny is challenged when women accuse other women, but the reasoning to do so is because they have been indoctrinated with patriarchal beliefs.

Women who press down upon other women, often due to a false sense of superiority, are participating in the ongoing oppression of women. Not all women are created equal. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw constructed a multiple identity structure called intersectionality, which recognizes the multifaceted identities everyone carries, and how they play into privilege and oppression (Pascoe & Bridges, 2016). It seems abstruse that some women would subjugate other women, but their gender is not the only piece of identity at play. While race and sexuality are not discussed at length in this paper, many women who acted as oppressors possessed identities that granted them the privilege to be oppressive. In the

17th century, and still in contemporary United States, that privilege is often a product of white, heteronormative, Eurocentric appearances and beliefs.

The majority of Puritan women who made witchcraft accusations about other women were young girls (Godbeer, 2013). Having been raised in an arguably cult-like religious society, children were taught that disobedience is a sign of possession. Due to the Indian War that struck just before the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, many young girls were orphaned as a result of the devastations on their town (Godbeer, 2011). Being without a family, these girls had little to no promise of marriage and children due to the lack of a dowry (Godbeer, 2013). They were raised by family members who subjected them to servitude, as well as physical and psychological abuse. These rebellious behaviors could be considered warranted, but during the late 17th century, it was seen as weakness that welcomed them into the devil's outstretched arms. Some of these girls were persecuted as witches. Others, in order to disguise their own unruliness, would accuse older women of bewitching them. Those children became known as the "afflicted girls" (Godbeer, 2013). It was the testimonies of the afflicted girls that began the

Salem Witch Trials of 1692 (Godbeer, 2011). It is unknown whether the afflictions were real or fiction, or some combination of the both. Regardless, the persistence of the afflicted girls to blame their behaviors on bewitchment only escalated the witch panics.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood (1986) writes: "her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison" (p.72). In this scene, a group of handmaids, women forced to relinquish all bodily autonomy in order to be used as slaves for reproduction, tell another handmaid that the gang rape she experienced as a child was her fault. An Aunt, a class of women whose purpose is to condition the handmaids to abide by their new place in society, prompted this admonishment. Atwood's novel is partially influenced by the Salem witch-hunts, and although fiction, the experiences of the handmaids exemplify similar experiences to those of the accused in Salem, 1692.

Ding-Dong the Witch is Dead

Sarah Good, one of the first accused of being a witch during the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, was a woman of endless misfortune. Arrested on February 29, 1692, she denied the accusations. Despite her denial, many testified against her in court and months later

she was convicted (Godbeer, 2011). In her diary she wrote:

We [Sarah and her second husband] lost our few acres, so that to live at all we had to beg. But I would not be servile, as a proper beggar must. I had my pride, and it was rubbed raw daily, until the neighbors felt that I was not humble, not grateful enough for their bounty. They construed my mumbling as curses, and perhaps they were right. How could I be unresentful, seeing others flourish who were no more deserving than I? (Good, 1692, as cited in Carrier, 1981, p. 154).

Sarah Good suffered. Some of her accusers were neighbors who had previously aided and/or sheltered her until they could not stand her bitterness. Mothers claimed that Good tormented their children by pinching or squeezing them. Others claimed Good choked, bent their limbs, hurt them in some supernatural manor, or cursed at them. Many villagers claimed to be victims of her apparition, an evil supernatural spirit, in other ways such as mysterious killing or sickening their livestock, witnessing her naked bloody body at night, or seeing her fly (Godbeer, 2011). Good was sentenced and sent to prison. Soon after, her four-year-old daughter, Dorcas Good, was sent to prison for using witchcraft as a method to seek revenge on those who

incriminated her mother (Karlsen, 1989). Dorcas Good's outlandish and deviant behavior does not seem unlikely for a child who had been victim to such injustice and suffering. Her situation was dismal at best. On July 19, 1692, Sarah Good was put to death by hanging (Godbeer, 2011).

The majority of Sarah Good's crimes were crimes against Puritan expectations. Good was defying her role as a proper Puritan woman. Her own husband testified against her, as he could not stand her aggrieved nature. She was angry. Life and luck failed her in devastating ways. More women than men testified against her, be them adults or children. Patriarchal beliefs about gender and behavior are the reasons women were divided into handmaidens of the lord or servants of Satan. Patriarchal systems within the Puritan society separated women.

Sarah and Dorcas Good were products of their environment; poverty, homelessness, and patriarchal societal pressures. Witches were not only a threat to men, but also a threat to the women who conformed to the Puritan way of life (Holmes, 2002). This summary does not give Sarah Good's story any justice, but it does exemplify how her resistance to conform made her a target for blame and accusations

of witchcraft.

What Do We Think About When We Think About Witches?

Satire is the leaven that keeps pictorial misogyny alive and fresh (as fresh, that is, as a dried dog turd that comes up nice and slippery in the rain). In satirical mode, then, let's assume we can connect a history of misogynistic visual representation with current manifestations of gender and age discrimination. Then it could be proposed that it is contemporary women's lack of humour that prevents them from identifying a hasty fondle by a parliamentarian as an innocent bit of fun, or "Ditch the Witch" as just a pun.

-Deanna Petherbridge, *Witches: A History of Misogyny*, 2015

In contemporary United States, memes, virtual pictures with captions, are used to relay messages about society, the human experience, and politics. While memes are intended to be humorous, they often have significant meaning. Memes are effective in that through humor viewers feel more connected and aware of the people and society around them. When used to convey messages about a specific person or organizations of people, memes can be detrimental. The imagery is sent out into the vast World Wide Web to be seen as the representation of that

person or organization of people. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) calls that representation a controlling image, which is imagery designed to make inequalities natural and normalized by using stereotypes or already existing images to justify or reinforce oppressions. Collins (2000) writes:

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones... 'Others' of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging (p. 69-70).

The peak of the Salem Witch Trials happened in 1692, but witch-hunts existed long before then and all around the globe. While Collins (2000) was writing about black womanhood, the concept of a controlling image can be used to justify oppressions within any group of people. Women are

relentlessly controlled through imagery. The witch, a stereotype used to control women in 1692, is still being used in contemporary contexts. The implications of witch imagery are tacit; even without historical knowledge, the message would be clear.

Popularized images of witches look something like the *Wicked Witch of the West* or the beautiful queen that transforms into the haggard old woman from *Snow White*. Disney did not create these derogatory depictions of women; rather, they have significant meaning dating back centuries. Stereotypes, while dangerous and hurtful, do not evolve from thin air; they have a history. Most of the women who were seen as witches were widows or postmenopausal (Godbeer, 2013). Not only did widows no longer have to perform wife-duties, which in itself was seen as an absurdity, they also did not have a husband to protect them from allegation of witchcraft. Postmenopausal women were seen as witches when they “suddenly” could no longer bear children (Godbeer, 2013). The primary role of women was to produce and raise more Puritan children. When this could no longer be done, it was seen as a sign of wickedness. These women, in their barren-aged bodies, were undesirable, and they became the

archetype that is seen in imagery of witches.

The depictions of witches seen in literature, art, and media were at one-point interpretations of how witches looked. Physical attributions that correspond with age, socioeconomic status, or deviance were used as tools to incriminate women who fit into those categories. Sarah Good (1692) wrote: “As for being a witch, I looked the part - bent, haggard, leathery-skinned - though in prison I would bear my last child and watch it die” (cited in Carrier, 1981, p. 154). Good knew her appearance was a piece of evidence in the case against her. Unable to care for her family, herself, or bear more children, Good was a victim of her own body.

Contemporary Witch-hunts

The notion that men are innately superior to women is built into the infrastructure of society in contemporary United States. The gendered hierarchy practiced by the Puritans, unfortunately, was not surpassed. Holding an authoritative and powerful position as a woman challenges patriarchal beliefs of gender roles. The contemporary denigration of women politicians as witches is rooted in a historical context.

When Hillary Clinton ran for the 2008 and 2016 presidency, the press and other media platforms vilified her. Pictures of her as an evil, haggard witch plastered the internet. The rhetoric used to caption the pictures were typically phrases from movies or books about witches. Just by doing a quick search on the internet, you can find endless pages of images that transform women politicians into witches. One in particular is an image of Hillary Clinton as the Wicked Witch of The West, smirking as she peers into her crystal ball that holds a picture of the Oval Office. The projection of the Oval Office in the crystal ball is important. Clinton is a woman who tried to enter a predominantly male space; a woman has never been President of the United States. Instead of recognizing her as an equal candidate, she was controlled by the image of the witch. Similarly, Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979-1990, was deemed a witch during her time in office and after her death. After releasing news of her death, “Ding dong the witch is dead” was a reoccurring response from her media opposition.

Julia Gillard, Sarah Good, Hillary Clinton, and Margaret Thatcher all have something in common. None of them

utilized an apologetic to counteract their transgressive behaviors. The “feminine apologetic” refers to subconscious or subtle actions that validate femininity (Ferree & Wade, 2014, p. 144). The example of women in sports is often used to understand the apologetic:

Her athletic ability received little comment, despite that being the ostensible purpose of the event. This kind of representation of the female athlete fulfills the public expectation that femininity conflicts with sports participation, conveying to both the athlete and the public that it is femininity that is more highly valued than sports performances. Hence the need for the apologetic (Wughalter, 1978, p.12).

For women to avoid scrutiny (i.e. being called a witch) she must remain feminine. Above all, our society strives to maintain gender order. When a woman enters a space that historically has only welcomed men, using a feminine apologetic allows her to be valued for abiding by the gender binary. Women in similar positions of public power, who push back against conformity, will face greater challenges.

Conclusion

Adam, the first man created in God’s image, was the prototype for

humankind. Eve (the descendant of a rib) was the second sex (de Beauvoir, 2011), the other, the gendered, the original sinner. We see this depiction of woman as the other in Atwood's (1986), *The Handmaid's Tale*, and in other influential feminist writings such as Simone de Beauvoir's (2011) *The Second Sex*, which theorizes man as essential, and woman, his other. Sex role theory states that men and women must act the part that society has designated to their own sex in order to maintain and serve their function in society (Pascoe & Bridges, 2016). Do sex roles really date back to the Garden of Eden? In some ways, yes. The story of Adam and Eve set the standard for how men and women are to be perceived in society. Although societies, cultures, and contexts evolve, the treatment of women as the second sex remains.

Witch-hunting was a method to condemn Puritan women who did not perform femininity the way they were expected. Contemporary witch-hunts function the same way. What is the social gain of the constructed witch? The answer: Imagery of the witch is used to perpetuate gender inequality and maintain social order. But the social loss is devastating. The continued capitalization on the witch perpetuates the devaluing of women. In Salem,

Massachusetts, the wisdom of cunning folk women, healers, and spiritual leaders was taken from history. Contemporary society does not benefit the way it could if women were able to hold positions of power without being discredited or suppressed. For people like Sarah Good, who did not have the privilege of power, the social loss from the witch as a controlling image is different. Good exemplifies the ways the witch image controls women who are powerless. Maybe the knowledge and leadership of those suppressed women would have led to a society that has more empathy for marginalized and mistreated people.

Looking forward, women will still continue to be seen as witches. But like so many other degrading images or words, there can be a shift in the way they are understood. Queering the witch can prospectively change the way women understand its meaning. Instead of being a tool for denigration, it can be an identity for empowerment. My name is Maggie Rosen and I am a witch.

References

- ATWOOD, M. (1986). *The handmaid's tale*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- BRIDGES, T., Pascoe, C.J. (2016). *Exploring masculinities: Identity, inequality, continuity, and change*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- CARRIER, C. (1981). Salem, Massachusetts, 1692: Sarah Good. *Ploughshares*, 6(4), 154-155. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy2.drake.brockport.edu/stable/40348597>
- DE BEAUVOIR, S. (2011). *The second sex*. (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage. (Original work published 1949)
- FERREE, M.M., Wade, L. (2014). *Gender: Ideas, interactions, institutions*. New York, NY: W. Norton & Company.
- GODBEER, R. (2011). *The Salem witch hunt: A brief history with documents*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins Press.
- GODBEER, R. (2013). Witchcraft in British America. In B. P. Levack (Ed.) *The Oxford handbook of witchcraft in early modern Europe and Colonial America* (393-411). Oxford, UK: The Oxford University Press.
- HOLMES, C. (2008). Women, witches and witnesses. In D. Oldridge (Ed.), *The witchcraft reader* (267-286). New York, NY: Routledge.
- KARLSEN, C. (1989). *The devil in the shape of a woman: Witchcraft in colonial New England*. New York, NY: Peter Smith Publisher, Incorporated.
- PETHERBRIDGE, D. (2015). *Witches: A history of misogyny*. Retrieved from independent.co.uk: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/witches-a-history-of-misogyny-9757605.html>
- WUGHALTER, E. (1978). Ruffles and flounces: The apologetic in women's sports. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 3(1), 11-13.