

Retelling Salem stories: gender politics and witches in American culture

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Abstract

This article argues that representations of American witches have always been moulded by the cultural politics of their time, and have always challenged consensus. In particular, they have been shaped by authorial positioning in the debate between American conservatives and liberals, especially in the area of gender politics. Examining closely the period from the Salem witch trials of 1692 to the present, the article identifies ways in which the empty signifier of the witch was filled with meanings by writers, dramatists and film-makers in order to bolster political positions from anti-clericalism to anti-feminism. It asks whether the image of the witch is inherently repressive or whether it has proved possible to use it in a truly radical way.

Keywords

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At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was home to bubbling controversies over witchcraft, Wicca and Satanism. Was it right for soldiers to be granted the right to practice witchcraft? Was Wicca satanic, or criminal, or sexually deviant? A number of court cases fed public interest in the subject (Eilers 2003). Some Christian activists made a broad assault on witchcraft generally: it was suggested that Wicca conspired with feminism and socialism in an 'anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians' (Esler 1997: 158). This last assertion had been made as early as 1992 by Christian coalition spokesman Pat Robertson. In the campaign for the 2000 Senate elections, Hillary Clinton was repeatedly portrayed as the Blair Witch. Cartoons depicted her as a child-stalking sorceress, ironically bearing her book *It Takes A Village* (1996) – to raise a child, the saying goes. Her 'Hillary 2000' bumper stickers were arranged in the shape of Blair Witch stickmen. A right wing 'wicked witch' website was created to chronicle her alleged misdeeds (Smallwood). In 2000 it was clear that witches, both real and metaphorical, were a highly politicised symbol and a touchstone for both left and right, particularly when it came to issues of gender politics.

To understand America's modern obsession with witches, we must look back at three key periods of American history: the 1690s, 1880–1900, and finally at the middle decades of the twentieth century from 1930. In each period witches have reared their, usually ugly, heads at

moments of national crisis, when America was torn between radical and conservative impulses. And in the present day, popular culture has revived and rewritten the witch stories from all three periods in a way that suggests powerfully America's enduring reliance on the past.

Salem stories

The significance of the first period is obvious: in 1691–2 the Salem witchcraft trials took place. As is well known, in the area surrounding Salem, Massachusetts, nineteen people were hanged for witchcraft, and at least 156 imprisoned, one of whom was pressed to death for refusing to plead. The Salem witchcraft trials were not America's first, and they would not be the last: accusations began in about 1640 and continued to initiate legal process until at least 1697 (Hall 1999, Putnam Demos 1982). But their scale and the cultural soul-searching that they provoked was unique. In a book notable for its own fractured nature (Silverman 1984: 114–117), Cotton Mather described the two sides in the dispute, lamenting that he must record division between two groups at all:

On the one side; [Alas, my Pen, must thou write the word, Side in the Business?] There are very worthy Men, who having been call'd by God, when and where this Witchcraft first appeared upon the Stage to encounter it, are earnestly desirous to have it sifted unto the bottom of it . . . On the other side [if I must again use the word Side, which yet I hope to live to blot out] there are very worthy Men, who are not a little dissatisfied at the Proceedings in the Prosecution of this Witchcraft.

(Mather 1991: 22)

Mather's feeling was that the devil was at work in the very divisions between colonists: 'we are not aware of the Devil, if we do not think, that he aims at inflaming us one against another' (Mather 1991: 21, 25). Like Daniel Defoe and others after him, he regarded the enthusiastic posturing of parties as inherently satanic. Historians have concluded that Mather's focus on the ills of factionalism was probably justified by his knowledge of the political situation in early modern Massachusetts. In particular, Paul Boyer, Stephen Nissenbaum, Peter Charles Hoffer and Bryan F. Le Beau have explored anxieties caused by the abrogation of the colony's Charter in 1684 and the overthrow of Governor Edmund Andros in 1689, which threw into doubt colonial standing and legal processes. Boyer and Nissenbaum found dispute at every level of Salem life, raging over property, taxes, community obligations and representation between the families of accusers and accused. The radicalism of John Winthrop's city on a hill had given way to the grasping commercialism of expanding towns such as Salem and Springfield. From the earliest times, therefore, American witchcraft had political implications.

Ironically, both Cotton and (to a lesser extent) his father Increase found themselves victims of this politicization, pilloried among a witch-hunting

'gallery of villains', most notably by Robert Calef in his *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700). The first widespread – national and international – debate about American witchcraft produced immediately the polarity that was to characterize its representation. Cotton Mather was ridiculed by Calef and others took up his stance. Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson, writing in 1765, suspected fraud and superstition, whilst Democrat diplomat George Bancroft accused Cotton Mather in 1834 of credulity, vanity and selfishness. Charles Upham, in his standard mid-nineteenth century history of Salem witchcraft, wrote of 'perverse misrepresentation', secrecy and cunning in a 'purpose of restoring and strengthening the influence of the clerical and spiritual leaders' by fomenting witch-hunting (Upham 2000: 519). The anti-slavery pastor, mayor and congressman Upham likened this to the 'horror and folly' of the panic over the supposed New York Negro plot of 1741. Salem's accusers were thus linked with the conservative forces of 'fanaticism' and 'superstition' whilst the defenders and accused were associated with 'real and thorough reformation' and 'justice' (Upham 2000: 564–70). As Bryan F. Le Beau notes, in his introduction to the 'Witchcraft Lectures' of the 1820s, reworked as *Salem Witchcraft* in 1867, 'Upham established the metaphoric role the Salem witchcraft trials . . . would assume in American history' (Upham 2000: xxviii). The Mathers' actions are still often analysed, even in academic texts, in terms of 'guilt' (Middlekauff 1971: 160–61) and 'fault' (Hill 1995: 194) with Cotton 'personifying a demented, witch-hunting, Puritan culture' (Rosenthal 1993: 143).

'The old guard eagerly accepted the outmoded doctrines preached by Cotton Mather . . . the real threat was never Satan, but rather the glimmers of enlightened thinking' said Enders A. Robinson (1991: 252). Cotton Mather's defenders have, in turn, accused those who malign him of 'defective moral perceptions' and the creation of a 'conspiratorial theory of history'. Chadwick Hansen lashed the 'democratic sensibilities' of historians who suggested that 'the people are always healthy and that social catastrophes can occur only at the instigation of a corrupt leadership' (1969: xii, 172, 226–27). This polarity of a superstitious, corrupt leadership versus an enlightened, oppressed populace has become so entrenched that Marc Mappen, in his historiographical *Witches and Historians*, titled his first chapter on modern interpretations of the witch trials simply 'Fixing the Blame' (1996: 36), whilst visitors to the Salem Witchcraft Museum are invited to consider the witch trials as part of a continuum of reactionary oppression, from the internment of Japanese Americans to the stigmatizing of AIDS sufferers. And it was this reading of the Salem witchcraft trials as a battle between conservative and liberal America that would lead to the revisiting of witchcraft in the late nineteenth century.

Suffrage and the goddess

Upham's division of the superstitious from the reformers mutated quickly into the classic, opposing nineteenth century perspectives of Romance and

Progress from which witches might be viewed. Creative writers – Hawthorne in *Young Goodman Brown* (1835), Longfellow in *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* (1868), Greenleaf Whittier in several poems including ‘Calef in Boston’ and ‘The Witch of Wenham’ (1849, 1877) – joined with historians such as Samuel G. Drake in search either of nostalgic gothic or rationalist lessons for American modernity. It was against this background that a New York abolitionist and campaigner for women’s and Native American rights, Matilda Joslyn Gage, co-opted witches in her pioneering history of women’s spirituality, as Ronald Hutton has shown. Gage argued, with a ferocity that surprised her suffragist colleagues, that witches had simply been the victims of a masculine oppression continuing into her own era. Having read the Dominican Inquisitors Kramer and Sprenger’s notoriously misogynistic demonology *Malleus Maleficarum* (1971), and Jules Michelet’s (1965) work on witches as early modern French revolutionaries, Gage blamed the Medieval Church for beginning the witch-hunts. What she regarded as Christian degeneracy contrasted with what she had read of the veneration of women and goddesses in some pagan societies. ‘The church’ she said ‘degraded woman by destroying her self-respect’ (2002: 231). Gage asserted that women accused of witchcraft had in fact been early scientists, mesmerists and workers with plant extracts, elemental spirits and psychic forces not yet understood. The church had suspected and suppressed this enlightened thinking and ‘human rights’, with a ‘bondage . . . over free thought’ springing from ‘patriarchism’. Finally, the witchcraft prosecutions of New England had taken place because the ‘Puritan Fathers’, such as Cotton Mather, had ‘adopted all the unjust provisions of European christianity [*sic*] as parts of their own religion and government’ (Gage 2002: 236, 245, 272). Gage based her account of the Salem prosecutions on Upham, but took his reforming impulses a step further into outright anti-clericalism and feminism. She believed that the demand for suffrage was an extension of the revolt against the persecutors of the Salem witches: women’s ‘rebellion . . . against the tyranny of Church and State’ had its beginnings in early times and ‘its progress will overthrow every existing form of these institutions’. The road from Salem would lead eventually to ‘a regenerated world’ (Gage 2002: 510).

Meanwhile, an equally radical rewriting of the witch was taking place in Philadelphia. The journalist-scholar Charles Godfrey Leland had made his name reporting the Civil War from the Northern perspective and – contrastingly – with his writings on folklore and magic. He was fascinated by Native Americans, gypsies, and European folktales, and he collected and created spells and poems about witches (‘Witch Ballads’, Leland Papers). For Leland, a one-time Transcendentalist, the progressive and practical sprang directly from the spiritual (Robins Pennell 1906: vol. 1. 28–29, 33–35). In 1899, he produced the perfect fusion of the two in *Aradia: Gospel of the Witches*. *Aradia* was the poetic scrapbook of a late American Romantic, but it was also the political tract of another avid reader of Michelet. Set alongside Gage’s work, it reinvented witches as heroines of

Progress. But it also gave to the modern Wiccan movement some of its central tenets and rites, for Leland loved the romance of paganism as much as he loved the idea of revolution. *Aradia* brought together magical stories and rituals that Leland believed had survived in Italy from pagan times. They formed a semi-coherent whole focussing on the worship of Diana. Leland explained how he had learned of this 'Old Religion' from Maddalena, a practising Florentine witch, and her friends. She had told him of a text setting out 'the doctrines of Italian witchcraft' as early as 1886 (Leland 1999: vii, 101). In 1897 she had at last brought him a copy, in her handwriting. The stories were of Diana, goddess of the witches, and her messianic daughter Aradia (or Herodias) who had brought Dianic religion to the world. She had brought in particular the 'Charge of the Goddess' which promised: 'Ye shall all be freed from slavery, And so ye shall be free in everything' (Leland 1999: 6–7).

This goddess religion, said Leland, had survived among the oppressed. Diana was the goddess of the underdog and freethinker – a creature entirely at home in the late nineteenth century where anti-trust, anti-corruption and feminist campaigners were in pitched battle with conservative forces. As Leland believed, 'with every new rebellion . . . humanity and woman gain something, that is to say, their just dues or rights' (Leland 1999: 113). Whether Leland wrote, collected or wrote *and* collected *Aradia* is an unresolved matter of dispute (Mathieson, Clifton, Pazzaglini, Hutton, Wood). However, it served his purposes perfectly, and with Gage and Leland the witch was reborn in modern America as a feminist, as well as a revolutionary, symbol.

The final wrench that separated the exemplary feminist witch from the satanic conspirators, male and female, of Salem came from the man who married Matilda Joslyn Gage's daughter Maud (Brammer 2000: 141, Culver 1992). Almost certainly, Gage's work influenced her son-in-law Lyman Frank Baum, when he wrote his satirical fantasy *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900. Witches are everywhere in the Land of Oz. When Dorothy's house is swept there by a cyclone, the little girl is immediately hailed as a 'sorceress' herself by the Witch of the North, for she has accidentally killed 'the Wicked Witch of the East'. Dorothy, 'half frightened at facing a real witch', points out that 'I thought all witches were wicked'. But the Witch of the North retorts 'Oh, no, that is a great mistake' (Baum 1900: 17–18). The rest of the book details not just a mission to kill the lands' sole remaining wicked witch, but a satirical examination of the power of self-delusion. The wicked witch melts at once when doused in water (Baum 1900: 94), but it is the power of the Wizard of Oz himself that is the book's biggest surprise. 'Oz, the Great and Terrible' in fact rules his city and works his magic by stage-tricks, and ensures that his people do not discover his deception simply by keeping out of their sight. All wear green spectacles, too, so that they shall perceive the Emerald City to be so (Baum 1900: 111–14). Power, in *The Wizard of Oz*, is the art of 'make-believe' and 'humbug', and when Oz leaves the city the people choose the

scarecrow as his successor, for 'there is not another city in all the world that is ruled by a stuffed man' (Baum 1900: 126). Baum's involvement with Populism, with its criticism of established American leadership, has been widely discussed (Littlefield, Cook, Ritter).

This particular attack on masculine presidency is complemented by the discovery that the only person powerful enough to send Dorothy home is the 'Good Witch' Glinda, who does so simply by making Dorothy aware that she has always had the power she needed (Baum 1900: 128, 152; Paige 1996). The good sense and kindness of witches and the witch-like heroine is celebrated, whilst the book's male characters are the brainless (Scarecrow), heartless (Tin Woodman) and cowardly (Lion). Unlike the potent and emancipated witches, they are held in thrall by a fraud and induced to believe many things that are 'a great mistake'. By 1900 witches had become liberal metaphors for political dissent and female self-empowerment, pointing the way to a future where traditional delusions were comical and obsolete. Baum's next Oz book, *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904), contained a satire on suffragism, but the thrust of his first book is clear: it is broadly feminist, empowered by female fantasy.

I married a witch

By the 1930s, when *The Wizard of Oz* was filmed, the battle over the significance of witchcraft in American life had therefore shifted from the contested facts of history to the realm of fiction. It was also moving from the public to the domestic sphere, as once 'real' witches became mere metaphors for women. In the early 1930s, American novelist Thorne Smith caught the mood of the time when he wrote a story of a man who married a witch. The idea was not completely original, for there are a number of similar fictions dating as far back in England as 1634 (Heywood and Brome, Shadwell). But although witches were now available as feminist metaphors, Smith chose to make his witch a misogynist joke. He said of his hero:

he was, in fact, acting like many husbands, most husbands. They marry some camouflaged monster, and there they are – married to it – so they do their best not to know too much about her, while she generally does her best to make the worst visible as neon signs on a country road.

(Smith 1942: 39)

But ironically Smith's anti-feminist *The Passionate Witch* became the grandmother of American witch-comedies – sometimes overtly feminist films and television series' that would take the political battle over the witch-figure through the rise of first-, second- and third-wave feminism and into the twenty-first century. It can claim as its direct descendants plays and films (*Bell, Book and Candle*), television series (*Bewitched*), comic strips (*Sabrina the Teenage Witch*) and novels (*Practical Magic*), among many others.

Understanding the relationship between Smith's book and the film made from his story, *I Married A Witch* (Rene Clair 1942), is crucial in

tracing the evolution of witch from satanic servant to the problematically empowered heroine of modern popular culture. In *The Passionate Witch*, a witch arrived in a New England town, and seduced its insurance broker, T. Wallace Wooly. She bedded him, married him and proceeded to make his life hell. When Wallace found that his wife rode a goat at night and sacrificed cockerels, he demanded separation. But the witch, Jennifer, instead cast a spell that made him able to hear other people's thoughts. She then set fire to the town church and was killed by a falling masonry cross. But since she was not buried at a crossroads with a stake through her heart, she rose again in the shape of a horse. Finally her spirit was laid to rest in a bizarre accident at a crossroads where she fell fortuitously into a pit, whilst being speared through the heart with a crowbar. Behind the oddly-structured plot is the old story of the witch as – as the *Malleus Maleficarum* put it – 'a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours' (Kramer and Sprenger 1971: 43). As Wallace rephrases, his wife is 'an evil thing . . . a draggletailed harpy, a trull, a conspirator against the public and the natural order' (Smith 1942: 56).

Beyond the shrew-taming comedy is a tragedy, and a reason for the book's disjointedness. Thorne Smith did not complete *The Passionate Witch*, for he died of a heart attack in 1934, aged only 40. But the book was finished by Norman Matson and in 1942 he helped to make it into a film, starring Fredric March and Veronica Lake. In doing so he and his fellow-writers made possible a happy ending for a witch – to be tamed by marriage. The project was re-titled and its 'passionate' elements were toned down. As before, it told the story of Jennifer (Veronica Lake), but this time it gave her a motive for hating men, and Wallace Wooley (the spelling was changed for the film) in particular. Jennifer had been, with little regard for history, burned at the stake in New England 'long, long ago when people still believed in witches'. Her accusers were Matheresque puritan ancestors of Wallace, and the film took the line of Calef, Upham and Gage about their motives. Yet Jennifer was a real witch, and she did not die passively. Instead, she cursed the Wooleys, so that each would make an unhappy marriage. In modern times Jennifer was reincarnated, and the present Wallace Wooley (Fredric March), a political candidate on the eve of wedding his principal backer's daughter, became the target of a personalized revenge. But now Jennifer's evil marriage plans were far more sympathetically portrayed than in the book. She replaced Wallace's intolerable fiancé, and mistakenly drank her own love philtre, falling in love with Wallace herself. The witch was now assimilable, and when Jennifer's father opposed her plan to marry Wallace the price of his defeat was the final step in assimilation: that Jennifer be stripped of her powers. The witch became a mere 'mortal'. Thus, she could marry Wallace and they might even live happily ever after. She even ended the film living with Wallace in the governor's mansion, in a gesture that seemed to lay the ghosts of Salem with highly politicized imagery of reconciliation. It offered

a landmark in the progress of witches from representations of the criminal, heretical and outcast to respectability and acceptance.

The Passionate Witch and *I Married A Witch* are paradigmatic of the portrayal of witches in twentieth-century popular culture – as a transparent metaphor for debate over the role of women. The relative dating of novel and film is important in illustrating what is at stake each time the witch-figure is portrayed. In the 1930s America was battered by the Depression. Working women were seen to be displacing traditional male providers, and thrifty self-sacrifice was expected of wives and mothers. Smith's book therefore includes not only satire on grasping wives ('I do so much shopping. It's exhausting!' (Smith 1942: 40)) but attacks on intellectual women too ('a female pighead, an opinionated ass in petticoats' (1942: 130)). Betty, Wallace's secretary, is turned quickly into a sex object when she loses her job and becomes her employer's mistress, whilst the book's only other professional woman is a French maid whose contribution to the plot is to get drunk, 'bounce and jounce and jiggle' (1942: 105). The malice and parasitism of the witch is that of all women. But by 1942 American men were advancing to avenge Pearl Harbor, and women were working alongside them. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt provided a model of woman's place in society by becoming actively engaged in political life, travelling widely and writing for newspapers, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt promoted women's cause in various ways including the appointment of a female cabinet member. The economy was on a war footing and attention was turned to the wickedness of external enemies, rather than female enemies within (Cruniden 1994: 238, 252). In the year after *I Married A Witch*, Norman Rockwell would celebrate the virtue and utility of American women in private and public life in *The Four Freedoms* and *Rosie the Riveter*. Socially-speaking, times were good for women at home and at work, and so they were better for witches too.

But it was still clear that the best place for a woman was at home, even if that meant the home front. After the war, the expectation was that women would be glad to get back to the kitchen and the nursery. That was where Jennifer, the married witch, had ended her story in the film, despite the fact that her home was also the seat of political power. Some women, of course, did not want to stop working in 1945. And the witchcraft-comedy reflected this reluctance, its dangers and pleasures, in its next incarnations. John van Druten's play *Bell, Book and Candle* (written 1948, performed 1950) became a movie in 1958 and both began where *I Married A Witch* had begun: with the hero (Shep Henderson) violently attracted to a witch (Gillian Holroyd). Gillian was, however, also a successful businesswoman, running a shop. Her economic power was matched by her witchcraft, for she had enchanted Shep, stealing him from his bride-to-be on their wedding day. Witches were without scruple, and also defined by a lack of typically feminine attributes: the audience learned that they could not blush, cry or fall in love. But as the film progressed, a comedic ending became possible. If witches did fall in love, *Bell, Book and Candle's*

dialogue explained, they could no longer be witches. Gillian did fall in love with Shep. The catch was that, like Jennifer, she was from that moment no longer a witch. Both films thus ended with the sexy witch safely domesticated. 'I'm only human' said Gillian, contentedly diminished. She abandoned the black and scarlet dresses and glamorous accessories that marked her out as a femme fatale, for new look white and yellow. Her cat familiar, Pyewacket (named after one of the familiars 'discovered' by England's Witchfinder General Hopkins) left her, and her feline self-possession did too. Tanya Krzywinska suggests that the film 'expresses the sacrifices necessary to take one's place in the conventions of heterosexual romance and marriage' (2000: 150). Most interestingly, Gillian restocked her African and Oceanic art shop with shells and renamed it 'Flowers of the Sea' – 'primitive', profitable potency replaced by sure-fire economic failure. It would not be long before the witch-woman was back in the home where she belonged. As Krzywinska argued about *The Undead* (Roger Corman 1957), another witch film of the late 1950s, it was possible for female viewers to fantasize about being 'mad, bad and dangerous to know' but such witches ended their narrative either tamed or dead (2000: 122).

Return to Salem: *The Crucible*, *Bewitched* and the domesticated goddess

Bell, Book and Candle dealt with the politics of gender, but it also played on the link between witchcraft and liberalism by creating the analogy between witches and communists that was to dominate *The Crucible* two years later. As is well-known, Arthur Miller's Salem witches represented those accused of 'un-American activities' by the House Committee and Senator Joseph McCarthy:

in America any man who is not reactionary in his views is open to the charge of alliance with the Red hell . . . A political policy is equated with moral right, and opposition to it with diabolical malevolence.

(Miller 1988: 249)

Similarly, when Gillian tried to confess her witchcraft to Shep he joked 'Have you been engaging in un-American activities?', to which she replied: 'no, I'd say very American. Early American!' (van Druten 1951: 44). Yet, like *Bell, Book and Candle*, Miller's play was not just about foreign affairs – it also contained a powerful condemnation of feminine wiles that James J. Martine ascribes to Miller's increasingly strained relationship with his first wife and Marilyn Monroe, whom he would marry in 1956 (Martine 1993: 61–63). Miller invented the love triangle of John and Elizabeth Proctor and Abigail Williams, and it is Proctor's guilt that drives much of the action. The other plot-drivers are Abigail's malevolence and the chilly distrust of Elizabeth. Both women are blamed for the play's tragedy, with Elizabeth acknowledging 'it needs a cold wife to prompt lechery', whilst Abigail and her female fellow-accusers emerge as the play's real witches, with the revelation that

they ‘danced’, ‘Tituba conjured Ruth Putnam’s dead sisters’ and Abigail ‘drank a charm to kill Goody Proctor’ (Miller 1988: 323, 238). The reactionary link between witchcraft and sexual politics was strongly reaffirmed by *The Crucible*, even as Miller powerfully portrayed those accused of witchcraft as martyrs to liberal conscience (Schissel, Valente).

It was not until the 1960s that an American witch-comedy was brave enough to suggest that witches might be both liberals and liberated. Most significantly, they did not have to be, or even begin as, bad women. In the television sitcom *Bewitched* (1964–1972), Darrin Stephens, a successful advertising executive played by Dick York (and later by Dick Sargent), was married to Samantha, a witch played by Elizabeth Montgomery. Like Jennifer and Gillian, Samantha kept her witchcraft a secret during her courtship. However, this was no *Passionate Witch*: after a revelation in the first episode, ‘I, Darrin, take this witch, Samantha’ (17 September 1964), Darrin came amicably to terms with his wife’s abilities and she was able to retain them. Samantha was a witch, but she was pleasant and morally sound, she stayed at home or shopped sensibly while Darrin worked in his office, she cooked and cleaned, and she supported her husband’s career. It was very clear that she had forsworn magical practices such as flying and the ability to walk through walls. After their wedding, Darrin had made her promise not to use them. Sol Saks, who created *Bewitched* with Harry Ackerman, said he had initially had in mind a sitcom that was very spooky and witchy, like *The Addams Family*. It was William Asher, soon to be the show’s director, who saw the possibilities of the witch being, as he put it, the girl next door (<http://bewitched.net/asherinterv.htm>). In his version of the show’s genesis, then, the witch dwindled into a wife just like Jennifer and Gillian. But in many ways *Bewitched* pushed harder at the constraints it put on its witch. After all, this was Kennedy and Johnson’s America, not Roosevelt’s or Eisenhower’s.

Clearly, against the background of an increasingly vicious battle between conservatives and radicals over women’s place in society, a potentially more liberating analogy was being drawn between the witch’s magic and the woman’s independence of mind and body despite her family role. Elyce Rae Helford describes *Bewitched* as ‘an innovation in the representation of women in entertainment television’, in her book *Fantasy Girls* (2000). In the early 1960s, she notes, programmes incorporating an element of fantasy helped television producers address ‘the changing role of women in America . . . without risking a reduced viewership among conservative, white, middle-class viewers, or making plain that the culture was losing faith in the post-World War II American Dream’ (Helford 2000: 2).

In fact, *Bewitched* producer Danny Arnold had said the same thing in 1965:

fantasy can always be a jumping-off place for more sophisticated work . . . What we do in this series doesn’t happen to witches; it happens to people. But the messages are funnier when they happen to a witch – and therefore less offensive.

(Bell 1965: 7)

What couldn't be discussed openly without causing offence could be discussed covertly, using witchcraft as a metaphor for women's aspirations.

However, cultural norms could not be expected to change overnight. Samantha's renunciation of power had obvious conservative elements. Firstly, she had surrendered her autonomy of mind and body to Darrin through marriage, and she did not intend to take them back. No flying implied no flightiness, and Samantha was a happy, faithful wife. Sometimes she and Darrin would fall out, but reconciliation would always be the way forward and the happy end of the episode. She even spent several episodes reconciling other married couples, between whom there had been some misunderstanding. Safely domesticated, Samantha decisively reversed the stereotype of the home-wrecking witch, and in doing so suggested that all was well with the heavily gendered ideals of American family life. Where there was no problem, there could be no witchy threat. Even where a woman was demonstrably cleverer and more powerful than the men around her, it was still appropriate for her to fall in love, get married, and expect her husband to be head of the household. Refusing to be a witch had a gendered economic symbolism as well as a moral one. Samantha did not usually use magic to clean her house or whip up meals. Instead, she exemplified the housewife's version of the American frontier virtues of making do and working hard, without magical advantages or expensive gadgets.

But the show would have been very dull if the witch had never used her magic. As Harry Ackerman said, *Bewitched* had liberal aspirations, although it compromised them heavily. Many episodes therefore flirted with the pleasing danger that Samantha's witchcraft, like her subversive independence, might pose to Darrin's position as the 'man of the house'. The challenges of female witchcraft to male omnipotence were very traditional and often came, interestingly, from the oldest European demonology rather than colonial American beliefs. Spells might, for example, freeze or silence Darrin, whilst his wife went about her own business. This was the traditional way that witches managed to absent themselves in order to go to a sabbath, leaving their husbands insensible (Bodin 1587: 2.5, Scot 1584: 3.2). The plot of 'Mixed Doubles', in which Samantha inadvertently caused Darrin's boss to mistake her for his wife, whilst Darrin mistook Mrs Tate for Samantha, might be taken verbatim from the *Malleus Maleficarum*: 'devils can by witchcraft cause a man to be unable to see his wife rightly, and the converse' (Jacob and Sprenger 1971: 63). But there was always the reassurance that Samantha had Darrin's best interests at heart. If she turned him into, say, an old woman, it was intended to protect him from being attacked. Her relatives were less choosy about their motives: Circe-like, they cheerfully changed Darrin into a pig, a gorilla, a werewolf, and the Fisherman's Memorial statue at Gloucester, Massachusetts. They also gave him donkey ears. This last trick had been a witch's party piece since at least the time of St. Augustine. In the 1580s, Reginald Scot derided French demonologist Jean Bodin's claim that a Cypriot witch had once

turned a young Englishman into an ass, describing it as a ‘foolish fable’ and ‘the starkest lie that ever was invented’ (1587: 5.3). Most American colonists agreed with him: such tales were for ‘Papists’ who believed in miracles. In this way, *Bewitched* writers’ glee in playing with ludicrous transformations, rather than taking them as genuine threats, is typically American as well as an example of a liberal containment strategy for witch-women.

But other ways in which Samantha or her family might threaten Darrin would have seemed more likely to the colonists of Salem and elsewhere: frequently one of the witches would create just the type of ‘spectre’ that had caused so much anxiety for Cotton and Increase Mather. This spectre was the illusion of the witches’ own or another’s presence, a projection by a witch or, originally, a devil. There were many analogous moments in *Bewitched*, often revolving around a threat of incest: the time Samantha’s mother (whose birthplace was Salem) impersonated Samantha in ‘Which Witch is Which?’; when Samantha’s daughter Tabitha made a fake Samantha to get herself more attention; or when Samantha’s cousin Serena replaced her, completely fooling Darrin. Spectres would usually visit their bewitched victims at night, hanging over their bed to make threats, or offer temptations. In 1692, for instance, Susannah Sheldon described how the spectres of accused witches Bridget Bishop, Mary English and Giles Corey came to her to proffer wicked books, pray to the devil and to assault Susannah (Sheldon v. Bishop and others [1692]). Just as with earlier stories of spectral visits, Endora’s, Tabitha’s and Serena’s transformations and fake Samanthas created a variety of obvious threats to Darrin. His home had been invaded by strange females, posing as his dear wife. He might have ended up in bed with his mother-in-law, his wife’s cousin or a fake wife, a kind of pseudo-succubus. Witches were certainly thought to be able to work with devils to create succubi, demonic doubles of beautiful women who tempted men to have sex with them. In the event, everything was set to rights when the transformations were discovered – but not before Endora (Agnes Moorehead) had embarked on an affair with Darrin’s friend Bob. Naturally, the Stephens’ neighbours believed that Samantha was being unfaithful, a further witchy threat to family unity.

Another classic theme was the threat that witches might pose to children. Whilst this was a well-developed European obsession long before America was colonised, the early settlers made it their own, and *Bewitched* echoed this concern. In ‘There’s No Witch Like an Old Witch’ (1 April 1965), Samantha’s Aunt Clara (Marion Lorne) got a job as a baby-sitter. Soon she was entertaining her charges with stories of flying from the roof, and bringing their toys to life. Their parents became worried that witchcraft was at work, and, astonishingly for the 1960s, Aunt Clara was taken before a magistrate. It was only because he was prepared to believe that she was just a children’s entertainer that she avoided serious consequences. It is impossible not to think during these episodes of the many cases collected by the Mathers of children accusing old women of harming

them or tempting them into danger: Elizabeth Knapp (Mather Papers), Katherine Branch (Wyllys Papers), and perhaps most evidently the Goodwin children, who accused their laundress of bewitching them in 1688 (Mather 1689). There was also anxiety about witches and newborns (Wyllys Papers, Box 1), reflected in scenes on the maternity ward when Samantha gave birth to her children. Here, the matron was pitted against invasive female witches, who brought unsuitable flowers and flouted visiting rules. Endora even abducted her granddaughter from the hospital. The sight of Endora hovering over rows of cots might well have stirred queasy memories of Miller's Ann Putnam lamenting her dead infants only a decade before:

I have laid seven babies unbaptised in the earth. Believe me, sir, you never saw more hearty babies born. And yet, each would wither in my arms the very night of their birth . . . They were murdered, Mr. Parris!

(Miller 1988: 235)

However, the show's basic assumptions meant that the threat of witchcraft was present only to be closed down, its potency contained by mutual respect and amity. Samantha was an exemplary mother and wife. Women's domestic magic was saturnalian – an explosion of excitement and disruption into everyday life, that could easily be quelled and which served, in fact, to reaffirm the usual family values pleasantly. In the 1960s and 70s, women's social, cultural and economic power was seen to be in need of careful control. But resistance to that control was more sustained and attractive than ever before, and the power itself was less of a threat.

Bewitched created a template for later depictions of witches, modifying the one inherited from *I Married A Witch* and *Bell, Book and Candle*. The tension between radically empowering women and conservatively affirming the need to control them was played out each week, and was left unresolved. But *Bewitched* did also offer more subversive pleasures to those who equated witchcraft with women's lib. Samantha might overtly have renounced the use of witchcraft at will, but she was always 'needing' to use her powers in petty ways when Darrin wasn't looking. And where Samantha would not resort to magic, her strident, hedonistic mother Endora undoubtedly would. She was an uncompromising rebel against the strictures of patriarchal human society. Separated from Samantha's father and enjoying a single life that included flings with much younger men, she was wilful, loud, mischievous and vain, favouring bright make-up and kaftans, sixties symbols of free-thinking. She was a foil for her conservative daughter, but also an inspiration. Scriptwriter Lila Garrett saw Endora as offering an alternative to liberal women viewers who 'were a little annoyed at times to see a woman like Samantha, who was that capable, insisting on staying at home all the time' (Pilato 1996: 58).

The scriptwriters', director's and star's unease with women's traditional roles was also manifested on screen by the creation of the new witch

Serena. Serena appeared first in the episode in which Tabitha was born, and was Samantha's cousin. Actually she was played by Montgomery herself. Split-screen technology allowed a split personality. Serena was single, 'wild', a relentlessly fashionable and funky socialite – Samantha's 'alter-ego', as Montgomery called her, who had certainly not given up witchcraft or any other power. To signpost her significance, Montgomery adopted the sound-alike pseudonym Pandora Spocks to play Serena. Pandora has always been a figure associated with rebellious women. Similarly Serena gave Montgomery an outlet for her more radical side. She had a changeable beauty mark on her face which one week might take the form of a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament peace symbol, the next a question mark. Montgomery's opposition to the Vietnam War thus surfaced in Serena (Pilato 1996: 39, 5). She also wore a number of variations on the symbol for femaleness, including a combination of female with male symbols. Serena was part of the wider witch family, and so made safer than the traditional solitary witch-figure, and her character may also have been made acceptable because viewers could tell that really she was the same actress as sweet Samantha. But she was undoubtedly a smuggling into the show of non-family-values and possibilities for women (and witches) beyond the family – hippie, radical, single lifestyles. These had been seen as too daring in 1963 when the show was conceived. When Montgomery's screen-daughter Tabitha was the focus of a 1977 spin-off series developed by William Asher, it was notable that she was more Serena than Samantha. Like Montgomery, she was a woman working outside her home as a television producer. The show's publicity marketed her with explicit reference to *Bewitched* as 'single, liberated and more sophisticated than a television witch would have been fourteen years ago' (Columbia press pack). *Bewitched* thus redefined the parameters of witchcraft-comedy, and set up new ones which could be explored further by later shows. Its ambiguity was probably its most useful legacy: witchcraft could be read in different ways by conservatives and liberals.

After Bewitched

A good example of the ambivalent sexual politics involved in reading witches in the decades after *Bewitched* is John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*. Published in 1984 and filmed in 1989, it is set in the post-Woodstock Vietnam era, and it began with the idea that 'this air of Eastwick empowered women' (Updike 1984: 8). The witches, Alexandra Spofford, Jane Smart and Sukie Rougemont, are three different facets of the American woman: a plump, depressed artist from the West, a beautiful, intelligent local reporter, and a sharp, embittered musician and music teacher from Massachusetts. Each is divorced, and that 'being left' is what has conferred their power (Updike 1984: 183). With a delicious shock the reader learns that each has apparently murdered her former husband:

Oswald Spofford rested on a high kitchen shelf in a jar, reduced to multi-coloured dust, the cap screwed on tight . . . Jane Smart's ex, Sam, hung in

the cellar of her ranch house among the dried herbs and simples and was occasionally sprinkled, a pinch at a time, into a philtre, for piquancy; and Sukie Rougemont had permanized hers in plastic and used him as a place mat.

(Updike 1984: 6–7)

As the novel puts it, this is ‘queer and queerly satisfying’ (Updike 1984: 8). But the mood quickly darkens until it is as unlike *Bewitched* as any demonology. The witches, whilst compelling, become less attractive as we hear of their alienated latchkey children (‘in the way . . . the little shits’ (1984: 67)), their unpleasantly graphic serial adulteries and their bewitchment of several other women. The upright, moralistic conservative Felicia Gabriel is murdered by her husband after the witches decide she ‘should be put out of her misery’ (1984: 128), but most horrific is the hexing of her daughter Jenny, their former friend, whom the witches kill by giving her incurable multiple cancers.

All this comes about because the three women have allied themselves with Satan, in the shape of their new neighbour and lover Darryl van Horne. How much their increasing malignity springs from this manipulative male figure is debatable. It is van Horne’s marriage to Jenny that drives the witches to kill her – which suits van Horne, for he then takes up with her brother. When two of them try to reverse the harm done to Jenny, they find it is impossible. Is the reader to conclude that the witches are in Satan’s thrall, and that their power is no longer their own? Why does it spring in any case from ‘being left’ by a male? In the film, too, the witches see the error of their ways. There is no Jenny to be murdered, and the women begin to repent shortly after Felicia’s death. But here, when they turn against the Devil they have the skill to bewitch and drive him away, taking back their own power to end the story living in a happy communal family with their (and his) new babies. In the novel they fall out and scatter, a pattern prefigured in *Season of the Witch* (also known as *Jack’s Wife*) (Romero 1973) and that would be echoed in *The Craft* (Fleming 1996) where the initially desirable empowerment of female witches is likewise seen to end in murder and mutual recrimination (Krzywinska 2000: 131–4, Moseley 2002: 413–15). Conservative viewers of both texts would see much to commend – if they could ignore the evident attractions of the power of female witchcraft (Verduin, Welsh, Jurkiewicz).

Updike, whose reading for *The Witches of Eastwick* included the *Malleus Maleficarum* (cited on page 15), seems ultimately to endorse its misogyny – but there is uncertainty in his conclusion, as in many such fictions. The witches of Eastwick were ‘gorgeous and doing evil’ (Updike 1984: 316). Their gorgeousness is both threatening and attractive, partly perhaps a genuine beauty and power, partly a snare – like the traditional Disney witch-queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), or Thorne Smith’s Jennifer, with her glamour covering hideous underlying evil. The Eastwick witches’ gorgeousness is linked to ‘doing evil’ by that unexpected conjunction ‘and’, but also set apart from it. For his finale, the narrator

sites himself among their scandalized, tantalized neighbours, left behind in Eastwick. He feels something 'oblong and invisible and exciting' in the legacy of the witches, 'a scandal, life like smoke rising twisted into legend' (Urdike 1984: 316). What do these final words mean? The novel that had promised much to the women's movement realizes some of that liberating potential: 'you *can* fly!' says van Horne to Alexandra. This is even more evident in the film version, where the witches (Cher, Susan Sarandon and Michelle Pfeiffer) do fly indeed. The conventional beauty of the actresses, as Rachel Moseley's analysis of glamorous witches suggests, celebrates femininity whilst rejecting feminist identity (Moseley 2002: 419, Campbell 1988). But the novel privileges less conventionally attractive female beauty, celebrates female power, then retreats into the condemnation of a brutal murder and into confusing assertions that 'our nation is labouring under a malignant spell' (201). What is this spell? Liberalism, conservatism, witchcraft, feminism, post-lapsarian corruption or something else? The reader remains unsure.

There were more positive uses of the ambiguities bequeathed by *Bewitched*, however. The 1990s television series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Charmed*, and the 1998 film *Practical Magic* (Dunne 1998), based on Alice Hoffman's novel, used the tricks taught by Samantha Stephens to domesticate, and thus paradoxically liberate, their witches' power. In all three cases, witchcraft ran in the family of the main characters, as it did in Samantha's. Thus becoming a witch was not seen as an individual's acquisition of power as with *The Craft*, *The Witches of Eastwick* or the ultimately equally negative *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but as a respectable family inheritance. The leading witches of *Sabrina* and *Practical Magic* (Sabrina and Sally) both lived safely in a family unit, with their witch aunts. Both were pretty, heterosexual and keen to please those around them by working hard and doing domestic chores. Sally, says the novel, 'was the one who cooked healthy dinners of meat loaf and fresh green beans and barley soup, using the recipes from a copy of *Joy of Cooking*' (Hoffman 1995: 6). Her magic was 'grounded in domesticity' (Krzywiska 2000: 151). She was 'Glinda good witch', perceptively noted Sandra Bullock in her DVD commentary for the film. Like Samantha Stephens, Sally married and had children of her own, and Sabrina also married her boyfriend at the series' end.

The three witches of *Charmed* are also beautiful, heterosexual and live in an immaculate family home in sisterly harmony. They are watched over by a grandmother in the next world, a more-or-less absent but still living father, and the memory of their mother. The show is family-focused, explicitly about the sisters' relationship, Warner's official show website explains, a 'bond that reached far beyond petty sisterly grudges' (<http://www.thewb.com/Shows>). Since the series was developed in the 1990s and is still running, the sisters have careers but, crucially, these do not interfere with screen time at home with each other (although they do sometimes clash with the women's magical commitments). They make

time for partners, and even children. When one sister, Prue (Shannen Doherty) died in battle, she was replaced by another 'long-lost' half-sister, Paige (Rose McGowan). Family, the dialogue repeatedly insists, is vital for the women's power as 'the power of three': witchcraft runs in their veins, literally. In the episode 'Astral Monkey', a doctor accidentally acquired it whilst testing their blood (4 May 2000). The ultimate weapon used by their adversaries is to turn the sisters against each other, so that the power of three will be lost. Sisterliness thus limits their freedom. They must act together or be powerless, often as spiritual chaperones to each other, with decisions and action taken communally seen to be far wiser and more effective than whatever each woman once thought or did as an individual. When Phoebe betrayed her sisters in favour of her romance with the demon Cole, the consequences were serious and the relationship disastrous. Phoebe ended up as Queen of the Underworld, bearing an evil baby that must be removed – a sharply gendered warning against breaking sisterly solidarity to trust a mere male. To be acceptable, a witch still needed a family – not independence, or an ideology.

The same was true of the filmed version of *Practical Magic*. The film was more explicit about the specific need for sisterhood than was the novel, and this private commitment was what forced the witches to seek help – and find public acceptance – from the non-witch community. One lover and two grown daughters were deleted to allow uninterrupted focus on sisterliness for most of the film's one-and-a-half hours. Two further important changes to the novel's story made the sisters' relationship more central. As a girl, the film's Sally was traumatized by seeing what unhappy love can do to women, and cast a spell that effectively prohibited her from falling in love. She specified that she could only truly love a man with what she conceived to be impossible attributes, including one green and one blue eye. Thus she trapped herself in permanent immaturity, in the world of the family. Gillian, meanwhile, a sexual time bomb just like Kim Novak's Gillian, eloped early in the film, but before she did so she cut her hand and her sister's and they affirmed a 'blood-sisterhood'. This added tie to her family was what saved Gillian at the film's end. Sally and Gillian were seen to share a telepathic connection, a strongly stressed bond that ultimately enabled Sally to save Gillian's life. And to effect this, she called in the women of her community, who all performed witchcraft with her to heal Gillian. Loyalty to family directly created public acceptability, but it also seemed to preclude independent growth. Gillian was a lonely figure safely confined to her aunts' house at the film's end. Sally too remained at home despite her cosmetics business and her new green-and-blue-eyed lover (who was also made safer because he was inadvertently summoned by her anti-love magic, and thus had always been part of her world). Although *Sabrina*, *Charmed* and the film *Practical Magic* all have feminist elements, the need to keep witches domesticated is in each case striking.

Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg have explored why this might be in the case of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. They argue that Sabrina (whose

show was and is usually aired at times when it will be accessible to girls and housewives) is a role model of limited use to female viewers. This is because, despite a feminist gloss ‘the series’ affirmation of traditional patriarchal feminine concerns with physical beauty, acquisition of heterosexual male attention, and responsibility to others undermines Sabrina’s access to independence’ (Projansky and Vande Berg 2000: 27).

In conservative American society, they argue, women (and thus witches) are still expected to be self-denying, sexually secondary homemakers, even where they are allowed access to traditional male perks. Sabrina, say Projansky and Vande Berg, spent far too much time worrying about her appearance, competing for male attention, and either holding back her powers or using them selflessly to benefit others rather than advancing or pleasing herself. Like *Charmed*’s witches, she experienced severe difficulties if she used her magic for personal gain. Even though she was only a teenager, she was repeatedly saddled with moral responsibilities, and – because her own parents were absent for magical reasons – sometimes acted in a quasi-parental role to her accident-prone aunts. It might certainly have been expected that late twentieth- and early twenty-first century texts would offer more of a challenge to this state of affairs. The powerful, popular figure of the witch offers a perfect opportunity. *Sabrina The Teenage Witch* might have been particularly likely to take up the gauntlet and transcend the limitations of its original source, 1960s comic books, because its star, Melissa Joan Hart, and her producer and mother, Paula Hart, had such a grip on the show through their production company, Hartbreak Films. Both were thus by definition committed to smashing glass ceilings, and asserting ‘girl power’. Paula Hart certainly intended Sabrina to be an improvement on earlier television witches: ‘Samantha had to use her magic on the sly, whilst Sabrina is encouraged by her aunts to use hers to the fullest’, she said (Projansky and Vande Berg 2000: 15). But it is precisely ‘girl power’, a media-friendly pseudo-feminism, that is the problem. Today’s witches in popular culture are being denied the right to grow up.

The significance of suppressing witchcraft in America is still, surprisingly, too symbolic in the early twenty-first century for witches to be allowed complete liberation. Few fictions dare to let witches of all ages and sexes live like real, free people, and the furore over the *Harry Potter* books and films demonstrates perfectly what happens when an author tries to do so. Immediately, accusations of ‘promoting witchcraft/occultism/Wicca in the form of ethical and moral subjectivism’, or even downright Satanism, are made:

The whole purpose of these books is to desensitise readers and introduce them to the occult. What better way to introduce tolerance and acceptance of what God calls an abomination, then [*sic*] in children’s books? . . . Note how the adults are depicted as hateful and perhaps strict. Then note how these wizards and other creatures are the good guys. These types of writings are nothing more than Satan’s way to undermine the family.

(Abanes 2001: 39, <http://www.exposingsatanism.org/harrypotter.htm>)

In effect, a revolt of witches, ‘an Horrible Plot against the Country by Witchcraft’ as Cotton Mather put it, is predicted (Mather 1991: 15). In American culture, the novel *Practical Magic* perhaps comes closest to the liberal ideal of a witch exploring her powers and growing in independence, judgement and strength. In the novel, both witch sisters and their daughters find happiness with good men. Lives move on, strangers and risks are part of life’s magic and new strengths are explored. Patriarchal structures, whose purposes are to protect women and children from dangerous and corrupting empowerment, are less evident and potent here than elsewhere. *Practical Magic*’s very title is a challenge to the traditional story of the American witch. What is ‘practical magic’? For Alice Hoffman, it seems to be empowerment and freedom, especially in love. A practical magic opens up the possibility that real people might be given empowerment, and their lives might be a little more magical. Real people might live a little more like witches, in fact. With a remake of *I Married A Witch* planned and a *Bewitched* feature film to be released this summer (2005), audiences may be treated to a breakthrough in modern American culture – the portrayal of a disempowered witch figure empowered without condition, without strings. Or they may not. As the modern witch Starhawk said ‘I’m waiting for the TV witch who happens to be an auto mechanic, an engineer, or a molecular biologist’ (Starhawk 1999: 269). When Rosie the Riveter herself becomes a witch, then the evolution of Thorne Smith’s Jennifer will be complete. Until then, America’s popular cultural witches continue to inhabit the same contested ground between modernity and conservatism that they inhabited in the middle years of the twentieth century, the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle*, and even the 1690s.

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