

From Healer to Heretic: Tracing the Path of the WitchWomen, Wicca, and the Magick of the Ephemeral

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With many pagan rites and festivals celebrating matriarchal spiritualities and the feminine, Wicca's emphasis on the sacredness of the individual and the earth is a far cry from the inundation of wicked Witches appearing in popular culture and the Middle Ages.

To an extent a feminist reaction to medieval portrayals of Witches, Wicca revives ancient magickal, shamanistic and tribal wisdoms from rituals around the globe. Intent on correcting former images of women as either saint or sinner,¹ Wicca entails a liberation and legitimation of feminine independence through celebrating menstrual, lunar, and life cycles of maiden, mother, and crone. Magick, the art of changing consciousness at will, gives women a sense of power over their own lives.²

Striking similarities discovered by anthropologists between historical Witch practices in Europe, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific,³ illustrate a pervasive magickal worldview in which women were celebrated as midwives, healers, conjurers, seers, diviners and powerful sorcerers. Transmuted and modified under Christian influence,⁴ the concept of maleficium and heresy became increasingly attached to older, pagan elements of Witchcraft, and it adopted a unique stigma as an ecclesiastical crime.⁵ Hyped depictions of the medieval Witch were "not only female, but evil, old, and ugly,"⁶ a stereotype in contrast with women's liberty in Pagandom.⁷ Societal beliefs in women's inherent wickedness, them being "more foolish, and more apt to mistake... infidelity, ambition and lust,"⁸ ascribed all their idiosyncrasies to Witchcraft⁹ rendering it a sin almost confined to women.¹⁰ Phyllis Currott claims this archetype continues to hold tremendous power as a repository for modern culture's fear of women, sexuality, and individual freedom.¹¹

Brian Levack further asserts that underlying the depiction of the medieval Witch was a deep male fear of the sexually experienced, sexually independent woman.¹² Noting the use of the feminine rather than masculine form of *Malleus Maleficarum*, Carolyn Merchant argues the control and maintenance of women's place within the social order was one of the many complex and varied reasons for the Witch trials.¹³

Modern interest in occult paths demonstrates not only a feminist reaction against derogatory portrayals of women, but also a return to symbolism from cynicism, a modern environmental reaction to detachment from natural cycles and a move towards religions involving individual responsibility, flexibility, and participation. This discourse of Western esoteric thought develops a frame of reference for extra-sensory experiences and earthly rhythms. Wicca revives and appropriates alchemists, Rosicrucians, Freemasonry, Native Americans, Taoists, Aborigines,

Hindus, Sumerians, Egyptians, African Yoruban tribes, and much New Age discourse,¹⁴ aiming to incorporate contemporary concerns with ancient wisdoms.

The Wheel of Year is divided into 13 Esbats (full moons) and 8 Sabbats celebrating four agricultural seasons (Samhain, Imbolc/Candlemas, Beltane, and Lammas/Lughnasadh) and four cosmic events (equinoxes and solstices- Yule, Ostara, Litha, Mabon). These Sabbats are prominent in many popular festivals. Easter, celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox, is based on the pagan fertility rite of Germanic earth goddess Oestara (who is symbolised by eggs, rabbits and flowers). Samhain, New Years Eve on the Wiccan calendar, is a Sabbat honouring the dead where the veil between the worlds is at its thinnest. Celebrated on October 31 in the Northern Hemisphere and May 1 in the Southern, it is popularly known as Halloween.

The phenomenon of Witchcraft has been morphed and distorted throughout history and must be understood as a phenomenon rather than static concept.¹⁵ Indeed the term Wicca encompasses a broad range of practices, including Gardnerian, Alexandrian, and Dianic Witchcraft. On a general level, Wicca is animistic and pantheistic, and sees magic is within the individual.¹⁶ Practice can be solitary or within a coven, and it's most recognised symbol, the pentagram, represents the five senses. By honouring connections to female deities, historical figures, and natural cycles, Wicca acts to connect women in a way that is multifaceted and intergenerational.

In her novel, *Book of Shadows*, (named after the journal Witches use to record spells, tarot readings, invocations, rituals or astral experiences), Phyllis Currott describes how her synchronistic psychic experiences were not "sensible" and how "the world I lived in had no explanation for them."¹⁷ Many witches, who have had experiences that cannot be explained by scientific, rational means, note that Wicca has provided them with a spiritual path that addressed their own personal needs or ideology,¹⁸ allowing them to become no longer mere observers but become fully involved participants,¹⁹ a certain lacuna in mainstream religions.²⁰ Yet despite the resurgence Lynne Hume accounts that many witches still feel threatened about their identity, persecuted, or ridiculed for their beliefs, emphasising political and religious power tensions in a country that advocates freedom of religion.²¹ Stereotypes and representations of Witchcraft reiterated in popular culture in fairy tales, television shows, and films such as *Bewitched*, *Charmed*, *The Craft*, *Hansel and Gretel* or *The Wizard of Oz*, continue to inform popular thinking about modern day pagan and Wiccan practice. Unlike some popular belief, Wicca doesn't involve Christian concepts of the devil, original sin, forgiveness, redemption, hell, eternal punishment, sin, guilt, or divine retribution. The three laws of Wicca are juxtaposed with the medieval portrayal of the maleficent Witch; do what you will as long as it harms none, do not interfere with another's free will, and that which you send returns to you threefold.²² While medieval Witchcraft was centred in a context of monotheism, misogyny, and

prevailing patriarchal church structures and ideology,²³ Wicca insists on complimentary male and female roles and leadership.²⁴

Overwhelmingly a phenomenon ascribed to women, Witchcraft during the middle ages became a composite phenomenon drawing from folklore, sorcery, demonology, heresy, and Christian theology²⁵. During this process of acculturation, pagan magic partly survived when cultural elements and meanings were transmitted, accumulated, syncretised, reinterpreted, and transformed.²⁶ Russell states, "As paganism's influence on witchcraft was reduced, that of heresy increased."²⁷

The association with women was compounded by motifs repeated in numerous societies such as flying, broomsticks, familiars (often cats or snakes), use of ointments, nocturnal gatherings, astral travel, cannibalism, the evil eye, shape shifting, causing illness or death, and sucking of blood.²⁸ Witches became scapegoats as the source of any misfortune, disaster, or idiosyncrasy. Levack claims the further images included voodooism, bringing down hail on crops by burning enchanted substances, starting fires with hexed swords, and causing impotence by cord magic. A great repository for a patriarchal fear of women, *maleficia* such as hearing thoughts²⁹ or eating souls,³⁰ when seen as an organised cult, began to be seen as a form of perverted religion."³¹

The Witches' Sabbat, a celebration of natural cycles or fertility goddesses, can be traced back to *sabbatarius*, to do with feasting, and *Esbat* or full moon can be traced to *s'esbattre*, to frolic.³² During the Middle Ages these gatherings became seen as "a series of blasphemous, obscene, and heinous rites" where children were allegedly sacrificed to the devil and feasted upon, amidst Witches dancing naked and engaging in sexual intercourse.³³ Levack argues that this emphasis placed on the erotic nature of the Sabbath drew from nightmares and fantasies about anti-human and amoral activities³⁴ and the negative aspect of the church towards sex.³⁵

The medieval Witch was inherently diabolic. As Lambert comments, "It takes two to create a heresy: the heretic, with his dissident beliefs and practices: and the church, to condemn his views and to define what is orthodox doctrine."³⁶ Scholastic ontology gave Witches a logically consistent place within the Christian schema,³⁷ and the medieval Witch became the embodiment of all that was anathema to moral society: hyped depictions included forming a pact with the devil and trampling on the Christian cross.³⁸

Epitomised perhaps most famously by the trials of Alice Kilkenny, Beatrice of Montailou, Marguerite Porete, Na Prous Boneta, and Guglielma of Milan, the primary subjects of the Witch hysteria were women. The pagan notion of the Witch as healer remained prevalent during the Middle Ages; Beatrice of Montailou was found to possess two babies' umbilical cords, rags soaked with the first menstrual blood of her daughter to feed to her husband to secure his

love, frankincense to cure an infirmity of the head, a mirror, a knife, pieces of linen, grain of the herb *ive* to prevent sickness.³⁹

The foundations of medieval Witchcraft include chthonic religion, folk traditions, and low magic from the ancient Near East, Judaism, the Greco-Romans, the Celts and the Teutons.⁴⁰ The New Testament itself contains magical traces such as the exorcism of evil spirits and is influenced by Gnosticism.⁴¹ The term 'Witch' is derived from the Indo-European root *weik* relating to magic and religion, and the verb *wiccian*, to bewitch or work sorcery.⁴² In the fourth and fifth centuries paganism was still very much alive in the Mediterranean world and dominant in the north.⁴³ Many Mediterranean fertility rites exhibit characteristics of the later Witch cult, with Dionysian festivals, Feast of Fools and *dies Iovis* featuring dancing, eroticism, banquets, and animal disguises.⁴⁴ Familiars of the Middle Ages were originally dwarves (malignant spirits of darkness or ghosts), elves (spirits of light and goodness), kobolds (who brought good luck to houses), trolls, fairies, or Green Men.⁴⁵ As Wakefield and Evans claim, "Magic and sorcery... are not confined to one age... their expression is conditioned by the times... Belief in the interference of the spirit world in human affairs could not easily be eradicated."⁴⁶

There has been much speculation over whether medieval women actually believed they were Witches or whether they were deluded into the thought through torture and hysteria. Considering the anti-Witchcraft bias of the available sources and the fact that most of the accused were illiterate,⁴⁷ this question remains problematic. The reliability of trial records remains extremely dubious especially considering the widespread use of torturous devices, selectivity of evidence, and motivation of the inquisitors. Levack notes that devil worship usually did not arise in witchcraft trials until torture was applied and thus "it is valid to claim that torture in a certain sense 'created' witchcraft."⁴⁸ Russell claims however, "There is no doubt that witchcraft was a real phenomenon. It was real in the sense that large numbers of people- indeed at some points almost everyone- believed in it."⁴⁹ In this sense it can be said that people responded in panic that found vent in terror of witchcraft.⁵⁰ The concept of madness is only of limited use in explaining the medieval witch phenomenon, and one must be weary of imposing modern philosophical acceptances onto views common in medieval society.⁵¹

During the eighteenth century rationalism rejected the objective existence of sorcery and Witchcraft and the trials were attributed to superstition and fraud.⁵² From the mid nineteenth century emerged the romantic occult and esoteric approach supporting the objective reality of witchcraft to accommodate it in a long tradition of ancient wisdom.⁵³ Some argue that images of the flying Witch originated from a practice of Witches inducing sensations of flight by rubbing herself with a hallucinogenic ointment or salve containing aconite, henbane and nightshade, to produce sensory semi paralysis, induce delirium, excitement, or unconsciousness.⁵⁴ Similarly the broomstick motif was prevalent in pagan rituals

relating to marriage and birth, to sweep negative spirits from doorways and to jump over in a hand-fasting ceremony representing sexual union.⁵⁵

Witchcraft may also be seen as a form of religious dissent, a rebellion or escape from society, a means of providing fantasies of power for the dispossessed, or even as a projection of the libido upon Witches by their persecutors. Carol Merchant proposes the immediacy of individual relationships with spirits in the face of ecclesiastical structure and control may support the popularity of witchcraft among oppressed women; "No hierarchies stood between the witch and her will."⁵⁶

To a significant extent Wicca has been successful in redefining, renaming and redressing residual stereotypes left lingering following the Middle Ages. Many modern Witches now refrain from using the term 'White Witch' as it implies an inherent evil in Witches.⁵⁷ The reinvention of esoteric movements allows new perspectives on ancient religions to be reworked, integrated, and manipulated into new systems, ideas and patterns. Wicca is then "old in that it selects elements from ancient magical and shamanistic practices; new in that it incorporates these elements with new ideas which are pertinent in today's world."⁵⁸ As one of the fastest growing spiritual paths in the Western world, Wicca's feminine centric and energy reconnects women across generations, cultures and societies. Celebrating life cycles of woman as maiden, mother and crone, Fiona Horne claims, "The Craft today is really built on the sense of our culture having lost, buried or corrupted the old traditions and witches are attempting to rediscover them and make them relevant."⁵⁹

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