

I MAY BE A WITCH

Wild woman; healer; hag; crone; Cailleach; Baba Yaga; the medial woman; spawife; sorceress; witch. There are many names for the women who live at the margins and who play by their own rules but they all have one thing in common: they challenge the status quo. And of course many of them were tortured, drowned or burned at the stake for being this audacious. The witch is probably as clichéd and misunderstood as any archetype but, shape-shifter that she is, she resurfaces time and again through history as a symbol of female power.

This is the third in a triptych of essays that grapple with some of the archetypes that have been thrust upon me. In the first essay¹, somewhat to my surprise I found myself declaring: 'I have decided I want to be a witch'. I have since done quite a bit of reading about witches and discovered, disappointingly, that I am bang on trend. The witch is everywhere in popular culture at the moment². Why this resurgence? What is it about the witch that speaks to our times? And to what sort of witching am I being called, as a woman and as an artist?

I don't want to cover old ground here, but a brief historical survey teaches us that to be a witch is to be caught up in a power struggle. The witch-hunts of the late Middle Ages were, of course, not really about hunting witches but about the brutal lurch towards capitalism, as instigated by feudal forces — the nobility, the Church and the bourgeoisie. As Silvia Federici explains:

This process [of primitive accumulation] required the transformation of the body into a work-machine, and the subjugation of women to the reproduction of the work force. Most of all, it required the destruction of the power of women which, in Europe as in America, was achieved through the extermination of the 'witches'.³

As ever, women's bodies were the site of so much trouble. The decriminalisation of rape in Europe during the 14th century was part of a conscious strategy to curb the uprising of the newly empowered peasants by shifting class antagonism into an antagonism against women⁴. Beyond Europe, of course, the toll on bodies was even greater⁵. Anne Barstow exposes another grim late-medieval, misogynist manipulation of the law: 'That European women first emerged into full legal adulthood *as witches*, that they were first accorded independent legal status in order to be prosecuted for witchcraft, indicates both their vulnerability and the level of antifeminism in modern European society'⁶.

¹ Juliet Fraser, *I AM NOT A MUSE* (2023).

² See for example India Rakusen's podcast, *WITCH*: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/m001mc4p> (accessed 30 October 2023); witch *du jour*, Pam Grossman (cited just about everywhere): <https://www.pamgrossman.com> (accessed 30 October 2023); Sharon Blackie's book, podcast and membership program, *Hagitude*: <https://hagitude.org> (accessed 30 October 2023); and when even *Vogue* has been writing about witches, you know they've gone mainstream: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/modern-witches-experience> (accessed 30 October 2023).

³ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004; reis. New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 62.

⁴ Federici 2004, 52-3.

⁵ Federici 2004, 66.

⁶ Anne Barstow quoted in Kristen J. Sollée, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists* (ThreeL Media: Berkeley, 2017), 26.

So much has been written about the witch-hunts. It strikes me as very important that we are finally having this collective reckoning with the impact of this systemic humiliation, torture and murder of so many innocents. The majority were women and, of those, a troubling number were 'old' (over 40), unmarried and childless which, of course, equates to undesirable and pointless⁷. We know that the whole process was mind-bendingly unjust; what we don't know is the extent of the generational trauma carried by descendants of those affected by these witch-trials, for whole communities were caught up in this barbarity and many involved (as victims, relatives of victims, perpetrators, or witnesses) did survive.

One legacy of the trials was the subjugation of women's bodies by men with instruments first of torture and then of 'medicine'. Consider these two quotes. In the first, Allyson Shaw is researching the women accused of witchcraft in seventeenth-century Scotland:

During pre-trial incarceration, interrogators collected women's words as evidence to be used against them when seeking permission to execute them. The bridle played a role in the length and breadth of the confessions at Forfar: when the device was removed, the accused had sufferance to speak [...] While the torture itself often went undocumented, the devices remain as evidence.⁸

Then, in *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, Kristen J. Sollée observes that,

In the nineteenth century, unruly women were no longer witches in need of purification by fire, but hysterics, forced to undergo barbarous treatments deemed cutting edge by medical professionals at the time. Like witchcraft before it, hysteria (aka "womb disease") was a catch-all diagnosis that punished anxious, depressed, wayward, or highly sexual women[...]⁹

The parallels with current battles for women's rights over their own bodies in the medical arena are all too obvious. Four countries have recently rolled back the legality of abortion, for example: the United States, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Poland¹⁰. The smokescreen tactic of manipulating 'antagonisms' is evidently timeless. It is a power play, and though women are a common target, they are not alone in being weaponised in the universal game of exploitation.

Skip forward to the 1960s and something has shifted with regard to the use of the term 'witch'. Hitherto a branding, a casting-out, a curse, even, the witch has, somewhere along the line, become a *feminist* archetype. One wonderful example is W.I.T.C.H. which, in its first incarnation, in 1968, stood for Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell. Formed of several second-wave feminist groups in New York City, W.I.T.C.H. used performance art to promote what we would now call intersectional feminism, shape-shifting in method, membership and moniker as the situation required. Their manifesto resonates today:

⁷ 'A disproportionate number of accused witches were over forty years of age, which coincides with waning fertility, the criterion by which a woman's worth was measured in early modern society.' Sollée 2017, 24.

⁸ Allyson Shaw *Ashes & Stones: A Scottish Journey in Search of Witches and Witness* (Sceptre, 2023), 94.

⁹ Kristen J. Sollée, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists* (ThreeL Media: Berkeley, 2017), 146.

¹⁰ <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/worlds-abortion-laws/>. Accessed 31 October 2023.

WITCH is an all-woman Everything. It's theater, revolution, magic, terror, joy, garlic flowers, spells. It's an awareness that witches and gypsies were the original guerrillas and resistance fighters against oppression – particularly the oppression of women – down through the ages. Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, nonconformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary. (This possibly explains why nine million of them have been burned.)¹¹

They can't burn us all. And the coven should be roomy enough for all those who need it. Just as feminism continues to evolve, so too can this most mutable of archetypes evolve to embrace outsiders of all forms. A contemporary witch might be moved by Rosa Braidotti's assertion that

the radical feminist imagination can be a source of inspiration for new scenarios of endurance and reconstruction. This is all the more relevant for a world haunted by a lethal pandemic and the need to reconstruct communities in highly divisive and painful times. An affirmative posthuman ethics entails the composition of communities sharing the same imaginings and values. It involves imagining a collective subject as the 'we' who are not one and the same, though we are in *this* posthuman predicament together.¹²

And that brings us up to date. To be called a witch today is not nothing. The term is not benign: it is either a curse (normally spat out by an alpha male) or a wary compliment carrying the suspicion usually accorded a non-conformist. To call oneself a witch may be *à la mode* in the more liberal corners of America, the UK or Western Europe, but the serious pursuit of any form of feminist emancipation is still depressingly radical. Donald Trump, as usual, wants to have his cake and eat it. He is both victim and tormentor, as the occasion demands: the victim of a witch-hunt every other minute when investigated, and tormentor of 'Wicked Witch of the Left' Hillary Clinton, whom he claimed was 'in league with the devil', and should be 'bound in chains and executed'¹³. No surprise that he can't keep his grubby little hands from grabbing even our archetypes.

Whilst there is an argument that the absorption of the witch into neo-liberal capitalism may be the first step towards a terrible de-fanging¹⁴, I am hopeful that she is crafty enough to survive this ordeal. Alternatively, the popularity of self-identifying as a witch may represent a grabbing back, of sorts; an equivalent of SlutWalk. Regardless, if the term and the archetype continue to carry power, let us use it. *Aux armes!* But let us be mindful that this power has been hard-won across Europe and America; also that the term remains a death sentence for many around the world. As Sollée writes:

Outside the Western bubble, however, women are currently accused of witchcraft in shocking numbers. Women deemed witches for decades have been banished to "witch camps" in Ghana[...] Two thousand people accused of witchcraft have been murdered in Northeast India over the last fifteen years—the majority women—and an estimated six hundred elderly women were killed in 2011 because they were suspected of practicing witchcraft in Tanzania[...] Estimates by the United Nations list the numbers of witch

¹¹ W.I.T.C.H. Manifesto, cited here: <https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/4588-witchy-bitchy>. Accessed 31 October 2023.

¹² Rosa Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism* (Polity Press, 2022), 13.

¹³ Sollée 2017, 57-61.

¹⁴ See Robin James's *Resilience & Melancholy* (Zero Books, 2015) for an important (if problematic) expansion of this.

executions at around two hundred a year [in Papua New Guinea], and until 2013, murdering a witch in self-defence was enshrined in the country's constitution.¹⁵

So, what am I *doing* with all of this information about witches?

I am on a semi-sabbatical at the moment. About 18 months ago I snapped¹⁶. I couldn't articulate it like this at the time but I suddenly become somewhat detached from myself. The first image I had to describe this was that 'my crystal ball had gone cloudy'. I am no gypsy — I am too posh to lay claim to that archetype — but that was the metaphor I found to articulate the absence of my intuition. Or, perhaps it was there, but I glimpsed it only through a glass, darkly. This semi-sabbatical was one strategy put in place last summer to help figure out what had snapped, and what needed to change.

Apparently Harvard University introduced the sabbatical year, taken by/awarded to professors every seven years, in 1880. The etymology is clear: the sabbath (*shabbath* in Hebrew, from which our English 'Saturday' comes, even if the Christian church perversely required us to take our day of rest on a Sunday...) is the day of rest within a seven-day week. My semi-sabbatical is 'semi' both because it is half a year and because it is only half restful — I have dramatically reduced my performing labours, but I dare not rest from them completely lest I forget how to sing — but in the space that this has created I expressly wanted to read, reflect and write.

Sabbath...

Hang on...

What if I am pursuing the wrong etymological path? What if this sabbatical is not a holy sabbath but *a witch's sabbath*?!

And then it all falls into place.

Here are the signs that I may be a witch and this may be my sabbath: there are fire pits and naked swims and hanging out with other witches (mostly dead feminist authors) and singing long notes with no vibrato — radical, I know — and healing, not of others but of myself, from some trauma, yes, but more from the snap, and the sort of healing that feels like integration — of desire and possibility. For I am looking at these corrals into which we are penned, as women — the patriarchy, the Church (all too often one and the same), 'decent society' — and then the archetypes — maiden (virgin), wife, mother, lover, queen, etc. — and, as a singer, I suddenly see yet more corrals — the art forms that require a certain sound and behaviour, the roles that keep us penned in and in our place, that insist on pigeon-holing us as one thing and not several — and this is where we need the killjoy¹⁷ to come crashing in and say "Hey you, the party's over. The reckoning is here. I am calling time on this bullshit and my righteous wrath shall fall upon all ye who have upheld it."

¹⁵ Sollée 2017, 146.

¹⁶ I use this word advisedly, fully cognisant of its feminist implications thanks to Sara Ahmed and her book *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), which includes a chapter on 'feminist snap'.

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed again. The killjoy is a crucial, antidotal archetype, and you can explore it here: <https://feministkilljoys.com>. Accessed 31 October 2023.

And it's all about intuition, about cultivating self-knowledge, confidence and purpose, and woe betide a woman with a purpose that knocks up against the bullshit — Killjoy! Burn the witch! During this sabbath I am finding clarity about *how* I want to be, rather than *who* I want to be; or, to put it another way, how I want to *do*. For this revelatory unfolding is a lot to do with action. I am seeking to act more intuitively, to effect change, therefore, that is meaningful to me and to the communities I care about; to quit pulling my punches... I am standing on some sort of a threshold. (Perhaps I am at the edge of the woods — and we all know how unpredictable the magic is in there.) Some sort of subtle metamorphosis is taking place. I'm not sure, really, if I am becoming a witch but she offers me more freedom than the other archetypes, not least because she shape-shifts so magnificently.

And through the unfolding I discover that:

I am not a herbalist or a healer;

I am not (yet) a hag or a crone;

I could become, perhaps, a singer of hexes.

I am put off by the stories I hear about other modern-day witches — in podcasts, in books, in magazines. I don't want to be like them! I am not interested in magic, or even ritual especially, or reviving paganism, and I am certainly no green-fingered earth-mother who is going to start burning henbane. And yet the power of this archetype is in its flexibility: across time and across place, the witch is universal and yet inconsistent in form and habit, except in her commitment to subversion. As the W.I.T.C.H. Manifesto states, "There is no "joining" WITCH. If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a Witch. You make your own rules. You are free and beautiful. You can be invisible or evident in how you choose to make your witch-self known."¹⁸ Unlike the other archetypes (whether maiden, mother, lover, muse or diva), the journey towards witchiness is travelled alone, in reference to no-one else (not your parent, child, lover, genius or audience), and is essentially a reckoning with one's own potency.

What if a song is a spell? How can I sing in full embodiment, with intuition rather than intellect? What magic can I find if I reconnect with a timeless, liberated and idiosyncratic vocality? To sing has been so overloaded with weighty notions of 'good' and 'bad', and to sing on stage is to wear a professional carapace of polish and perfection that shields our vulnerability from exposure. How would a witch sing? Allyson Shaw imagines that a coven 'met in the wood, around a fire [...] at quarter days, solstices and equinoxes. They danced to *'gillatrypes'* or mouth music — vocalisation in place of instruments'¹⁹. (Wait, is Joan La Barbara²⁰ a witch???) What might my hexes sound like and, more importantly, how might they feel to those who hear them? I think a lot about *weirding*— "try something weirder!", I cry to my students, in the perennial push to liberate the classical voice from the false strictures of the *bel canto* tradition. Time and again we seem to need permission to include the full range of emotional motivations and resulting vocalisations that have been with us for, probably, a couple of million years. Perhaps this weirding is my witchcraft, or even my treason.

¹⁸ W.I.T.C.H. Manifesto: <https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/4588-witchy-bitchy>. Accessed 31 October 2023.

¹⁹ Shaw 2023, 52.

²⁰ Joan La Barbara's debut album was called 'Voice Is the Original Instrument', released 1976 on... wait for it... Wizard Records!

To be a witch is to resist being silenced. During the Scottish witch-trials, ‘*Scaldrie*, or scolding — a woman’s use of her critical voice — was also illegal.’²¹ And what is it that makes a woman adopt a critical voice? Injustice. Oppression. The terrible daftness of men and/or the status quo. As Judith Butler states, ‘Insurrectionary speech becomes the necessary response to injurious language, a risk taken in response to being put at risk, a repetition in language that forces change’²². Many of us are hungry for ways to express our rejection of the tired social constructs that do not serve us and — whether through engaging with witchery, feminism or identity politics — we seek first the liberation that can come with identifying as an outsider and then the courage to raise our voices.

And to open our ears. For the discipline of listening is another exile of the status quo. The art of making music is, above all, about listening; the art of *living* is, as Pauline Oliveros teaches us, about Deep Listening²³. This is perhaps where solitude gives way to solidarity, for a total retreat serves no-one and to listen well requires such empathy. And yet, what we hear may be troubling. Allyson Shaw again:

Much of women’s history is a long silence. Ours is the silence of erasure [...] The witch-trial interrogations break this long silence in a flurry of agonised voices, singing ballads, telling fairy stories and repeating the words of their captors. The confessions are perhaps the richest source of the voices of early modern folk we have, especially women’s voices — and they are a poisoned well. What can I learn from these terrible fragments? In writing these lives, my own experience surfaces. Silence is double-edged: it might protect you, or it might damn you.²⁴

Without my crystal ball I have been listening for the questions that I need to answer. Perhaps this is where I land: How can I use my voice — as a singer, as a speaker and as a writer — to dance widdershins? I am ready, as Cixous says, to ‘take my shameful parts in hand’²⁵, to write the unheard-of songs of my body²⁶. Le Guin, too, urges me to see the reclamation of my voice as a feminist undertaking, writing so powerfully about the father tongue, the mother tongue and the ‘other’ tongue ‘which may be our truest way of being in the world’²⁷. I am ready to write — to live! — in the latter. These essays are my confession. Offered, not extracted; unbridled.

Juliet Fraser, 31 October 2023

²¹ Shaw 2023, 244.

²² Judith Butler quoted in Sollée 2017, p. 85.

²³ Pauline Oliveros’s Centre for Deep Listening: <https://www.deeplistening.rpi.edu/deep-listening/>. Accessed 31 October 2023.

²⁴ Shaw 2023, 213.

²⁵ Hélène Cixous, ‘Coming to Writing’, *Coming to Writing and other essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 35.

²⁶ Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’. *Signs* 4 (1976), 876.

²⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, ‘Bryn Mawr Commencement Address (1986)’ in *Space Crone* (Silver Press, 2023), 45.

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