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Witches on Surfboards: How Witch Media Has Ridden the Waves of Feminism

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For the Classroom

Victoria Harris examines the intersections of pop culture, witchcraft, and feminism by tracing the history of feminism and its influence in television and film of the 60s, 90s, and today. She argues that ". . . transformation of the media's representation of witches throughout the latter half of the twentieth century into the present day [offers] . . . a viable lens with which to view the feminist movement and its development over time."

For this essay, you could take one of two approaches, depending on if you want to discuss paragraph organization or using descriptive detail in constructing arguments (or both!).

Option 1: Divide the paper into separate paragraph, place each in a separate document in a Google Drive folder, and randomize the order of the documents. Ask students to form groups and arrange the paragraphs in the best order. Compare and discuss group work as a whole class, and generate some key takeaways for how they might organize their own paragraphs.

Option 2: Select images for the three shows discussed in the essay. Ask students to work in groups and make two columns. In the first column, describe the features (signs) of clothing being worn. In the other column, discuss the cultural significance of the signs, especially in terms of the particular wave of feminism that they symbolize. In discussion, pay attention to how artifacts, like clothing and hairstyles, can contribute to arguments.

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There are a couple different images that come to mind when one hears the word "witch." The first, and most prevalent, is the stereotypical Halloween witch: an elderly woman—who may or may not have green skin—that lives on the outskirts of town, practices magic, and cackles maniacally. She might wear a pointy black hat and billowy black robes, and be accompanied by a black cat. The second image is much less child-friendly, as seen by Laurel Zwissler's description in her article, "'I Am That Very Witch': On the Witch, Feminism, and Not Surviving Patriarchy":

> …the Satanic witch…a malicious female magic user who derives her power from her voluntary enslavement to Satan and who practices the three abominations of heresy…It is this stereotype that drove the witch hunts of the early modern period.

This is the witch of nightmares, who kills virgins and bathes in their blood, eats small children, and has wild orgies in the woods—only to later sacrifice all of the participants to Satan. It is this image that drove the murder of hundreds of thousands of "witches." A person, most often a woman, could be accused of being a witch with—at best—circumstantial evidence, but the accusation would be taken with deadly seriousness due to the horrifying image affiliated with the word. Lyle Steadman mentions a demographical pattern among those who were tried and killed for witchcraft in his article "The Killing of Witches": around 82% were female, and most of that 82% consisted of widows and spinsters (109). Given that the medieval and early classical time periods were male-dominated, a woman's connection to society was through her connection to a man. Widows and spinsters—who lack that connection—were essentially outsiders to their communities, meaning they have no defense to the ringing death knell that is a witch accusation. The origin of witches is not crazy women with warts, but rather vulnerable people on the fringes of society.

This "diabolical" witch was the main stereotype, up until the revolution of the feminist movement. The last one hundred years have included amazing mile marks for the progress of women's rights: women can own property, vote, have their own bank accounts, and not be publicly burned at the stake if she decided to remain a spinster. As the ideology and academic thought concerning women's rights developed, so did symbols of female power: Rosie the Riveter of the 1940s, the Venus symbol surrounding the raised fist of the 1960s and '70s, and the reclamation of the "(insert verb here) like a girl" phrase in the new millennia. It was during a period of reclamation that the stereotype of the witch changed. The Satanic witch became the Feminist Witch: she who is abnormal, unconventional, and so independently powerful that it must be the work of the Devil or some twisted higher order being. The revamped image of a witch lent itself to the feminist movement by transforming the idea of a witch from something so inherently evil it must be destroyed to an empowering figure for those who did not conform to traditional society and were cast out for it.

The feminist movement itself has had many modifications, and these modifications over time have been grouped into "waves" of feminism. The first wave was that of Sojourner Truth and the Seneca Falls convention (1848), which was focused on legal equality (specifically suffrage and property rights) and challenging the "cult of domesticity," that claimed a woman's place was home and hearth, and that anything beyond was "unladylike" and therefore inappropriate for a woman to concern herself with.

The second wave surged from the 1960s to the 1990s. Women's reproductive rights were a hot topic, and it was in this wave that, according to Dr. Martha Rampton, feminism

"began to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother" (Waves of Feminism). This wave also featured the rejection of traditional beauty ideals, as women protested the 1968 Miss America pageant, and a group called the "Redstockings" held a counter-pageant: a sheep was crowned as "Miss America," and women threw traditionally feminine items like make-up, high heels, girdles, and other such accoutrement into the trash.

The third wave is characterized by the breakdown of heteronormativity: with the advent and rising popularity of the internet, users could represent themselves in a way unlimited by their sex. The internet also contributed to the third wave being a more global event than the previous two waves were—and it was due to this rising intersectional sentiment that many Third Wavers abandoned the term "feminist," as it felt too exclusionary in its definitions of womanhood. Third Wavers were the ones to reclaim the traditionally feminine artifacts abandoned by their Second Wave mothers, viewing it as a way to express confidence in oneself and one's body—rebelling against body-shaming culture—as opposed to dressing oneself up for the viewing pleasure of a man. Pinkfloor, a videogame company, has a statement that has long since been assigned to the third wave by academic literature: "It's possible to have a push-up bra and a brain at the same time."

The fourth wave is the modern-day; feminist motions from roughly the new millennia and onward are grouped into this category. This newer wave is like a mash-up of the best of the second and third waves: concerns from the second wave that were never fully campaigned were combined with the intersectionality of the third wave. Topics such as rape on college campuses, slut-shaming, victim-blaming, and the lack of support for expecting mothers in the United States came back into the ring of discussion, but with the undercurrent of "women" referring to any and all women: African-American/Asian/Native American/insert-ethnicity-here women, transwomen, non-binary and gender-fluid who present as female, homeless women, immigrant women, etc.; not just the cookie-cutter "educated, middle class white woman."

In his essay "The Decay of Lying," Oscar Wilde said, "Life imitates art." This is especially seen in how the depiction of female witches in media has changed over time alongside the feminist movement. Witches, as outlined above, are symbols of the repressed and persecuted; the feminist movement adopted and rehabilitated the diabolical witch into the new Feminist Witch. The transformation of the representation of witches throughout the latter half of the twentieth century into the present day is therefore a viable lens with which to view the feminist movement and its development over time. Alongside the development of the feminist movement came the convenient development and rising popularity of film: their side-along growth makes for a convenient vehicle with which to view the representation of witches over time.

The first episode of *Bewitched* aired the 17th of September, 1964—this is right at the beginning of the burgeoning Second Wave. *Bewitched* is a television series depicting the hijinks of newly-married Samantha Stephens, portrayed by Elizabeth Montgomery, as she tries to be the perfect housewife without the aid of the magic she has used all her life. Of course, it is not as easy as she thought it would be, especially with a mother determined to convert her back to the "witchy side" of living. Beneath the veneer of a quirky sit-com is a darker message: women should hide what makes them unique from the mainstream idea of a "proper woman." In Samantha's case, it is the supernatural powers she can call upon with a twitch of her nose. For many women in the 1960s, it could have been anything from body hair, acne, an indelicate laugh, or an accent. The real kicker in the case of *Bewitched* is that hiding her powers isn't Samantha's idea: her new husband Darrin—portrayed by Dick York—insists upon it, and Samantha complies because she loves him. The Second Wavers were frustrated with the afore-demonstrated standard of beauty for women—or the standard of what is "appropriate"—being dependent on the male gaze and dependent on the ideals of men, rather than the women it applied to. This type of censorship is seen in the episode "It Shouldn't Happen to a Dog," where

Samantha throws a dinner party to impress Darrin's potential client, Rex Barker, played by Jack Warden.

Rex Barker harasses Samantha; all evening, Barker makes inappropriate comments, propositions Samantha, and tries to initiate unwanted sexual contact. When he corners her in the garden of her home, Samantha finally snaps and turns him into a dog. Once the dinner party is over and all the guests leave, Darrin finally finds out the truth and he doesn't take it well. The newly-weds get into an argument, and when Samantha says that Barker "practically attacked her," Darrin says that she's exaggerating. The worst part, though, comes next: "Well so maybe he had a few too many! Any common, ordinary wife would know how to handle it, but not you, no! You end up turning him into an animal!" Samantha worked herself to the bone to make this dinner party a success; she cooks a multi-course dinner for several people—this was no potluck—and is seen mingling throughout to make sure all of her guests are happy. Samantha tolerates Barker for a time, knowing he's an important client, but everyone has their limits. Turning Barker into a dog wouldn't hurt him, and when he was turned back he wouldn't remember a thing—no harm, no foul. There's no risk Samantha's secret would get out, nor any risk Barker wouldn't sign with Darrin's company. Yet, instead of being concerned for Samantha's safety, Darrin is angry that she fought back—as if it wasn't her place to take an active role in stopping the harassment—and defends Barker, whom he literally met a day ago. Samantha doesn't stand for it though and banishes Darrin to the couch because he won't listen to her. The episode ends with Barker coming onto Samantha in Darrin's office the next day and Darrin punching him. While the episode technically had a happy ending in that Darrin stood up for Samantha, it doesn't erase what he said and its implications: Samantha taking action to protect herself is wrong, but Darrin standing up for his wife (only when there is irrefutable proof in front of him) is right.

The Second Wave crashed and receded by the 1990s, leaving room for the Third Wave. This was just in time for *The Craft*, directed by Andrew Fleming. This B-movie cult hit features a trio of witches, (Nancy, Bonnie, and Rochelle, portrayed by Fairuza Balk, Neve Campbell, and Rachel True, respectively) who adopt the new girl, Sarah—portrayed by Robin Tunney—into their friend group in order to create a proper coven of witches. Each girl has something they long for: Nancy wants power, and to escape the poverty her family lives in. Bonnie wants her extensive scars to disappear. Rochelle wants to get even with a bully. Sarah wants the attention of a cute guy who previously jilted her and spread lies about her. After they perform a ritual, their wishes come true, but in the worst of ways: The power turns Nancy into a tyrant over the coven, Bonnie becomes a shallow airhead as if the ritual took her brains along with her scars, Rochelle begins to feel guilty as her mean prank goes too far and leaves her bully crying in the bathroom after gym, and the boy Sarah liked becomes obsessed with her—to the point he attempts to rape her. After the attempted rape, Sarah wants out of the coven and wants to be done with the whole witch business, but Nancy isn't too keen on losing one of her most powerful coven members and attempts to kill her. The film ends with Sarah defeating Nancy, who is driven insane and is shipped off to a mental hospital to be locked up. The girls go their separate ways, never to practice magic again—with the exception of Sarah, who was a "true witch" from the beginning. Amidst the warning not to go searching for power, Filardi—the writer—manages to slip in some Third Wave feminism through Bonnie.

Bonnie is seen in the beginning of the film as shy, hating-attention, and always dressed in baggy black clothing that covers every inch of her skin. It is later discovered that she is covered in ugly burn scars and that there is very little hope they will go away. Bonnie's ritual wish is for these scars to disappear, and during a visit to the doctor, her scarred skin falls off to reveal an unblemished canvas beneath. With the advent of her new skin, a transformation is seen throughout Bonnie's demeanor, as well as her wardrobe. Neve Campbell's character begins to laugh, smile, and speak more amongst the group—the audience can see she is visibly happier than she was pre-transformation. Pre-transformation Bonnie hesitated to voice her

thoughts amongst Nancy and Rochelle, despite being friends. Post-transformation Bonnie had enough surety of self to hit on a random guy—just because she thought he "had a nice ass." Neve Campbell's wardrobe for the second half of the movie changes to reflect this: Bonnie trades her oversized coats and full-length skirts for a push-up bra and thigh highs, and her hair is consistently kept out of her face—either in loose waves or secured with a barrette—as opposed to the curtain she previously hid behind. Rampton writes, "…'grrls' of the third wave stepped onto the stage as strong and empowered, eschewing victimization and defining feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, not as objects of a sexist patriarchy." This kind of self-love through presentation is seen both in 90s teen fashion as well as in Bonnie. Whether *The Craft* influenced 90s teen fashion, or 90s teen fashion influenced the wardrobe choices for *The Craft* remains to be seen, but it is undeniable that Bonnie was so much happier once she stopped feeling ashamed.

The Fourth Wave, given that it is currently rolling, is still a mystery in its progression to many scholars; however, the beliefs and fights of the Fourth Wave can clearly be seen in a recent addition to Netflix's vast collection of movies and television shows: the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018). *CAOS* is Netflix's dark take on the *Sabrina the Teenaged Witch* series of the 1990s, which was based on the *Archie* comics of the 1980s. Instead of situational comedy-esque hijinks, Sabrina Spellman—played by Kiernan Shipka—battles bullies, a narrow-minded male principal, and Satan himself. The writers are intimately aware of modern-day fears, struggles, and social issues, and incorporate them seamlessly into the monsters and demons—both literal and metaphorical—that Sabrina faces. When the puritanical Principal Hawthorne—the head of Baxter High, played by Bronson Pinchot—refuses to punish the aforementioned bullies, Sabrina takes matters into her own hands: she psychologically scars him with his worst fear, spiders, to the point he takes a leave of absence from Baxter High. When homo- and transphobic football players target Sabrina's gender-questioning friend Susie—played by Lachlan Watson—and the bullies get away with it due to the fact they are on the football team and bring Baxter High prestige through their athleticism, Sabrina strikes back. She orchestrates a humiliating prank on Susie's bullies in order to get blackmail on them and founds the WICCA organization: Women's Intersectional Cultural and Creative Association, a type of support system for the women of Baxter High. In this way, CAOS is the poster child of fourth wave feminism: intersectional support and fighting the patriarchy.

People are fascinated by witches, as seen from the multitude of media in which witches of some form are portrayed: *Bewitched*, *Charmed*, *The Craft*, *The Witch*, *The Witch Files*, and the many variations of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch.* The list just keeps going on, and over time more can only be added. The Fourth Wave is still rolling, so we can't be sure what its course will be, but this writer is sure of one thing: the future is feminist.

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