

WITCH SLUT ARE YOU? THE MEDIEVAL TO THE MODERN

The witch has an illustrious, multi-cultural heritage that stretches back to the dawn of civilization. You can find the legacy of the witch in Sumerian tales of Inanna, in Egyptian legends of Isis, and in Hindu myths of Kali. The wonders and horrors of womankind were embodied by these generative, destructive mother goddesses who symbolized both birth and death, light and dark.

“The mysteries of female biology dominated human religious and artistic thought, as well as social organization, for at least the first 200,000 years of human life on earth,” write Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor in *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*. And yet, somewhere in the midst of monotheism’s dawn, when belief was consolidated around a single male deity, women began to take on increasingly sinister roles in religious and artistic lore.

In Christianity, the witch’s earliest ancestor is Eve. The original bad girl of the Bible, Eve is cast as weak and susceptible to Satan, ravenous for forbidden knowledge proffered in apple form by his slithery minion. Eve’s actions caused humankind to be cast out of paradise and sentenced to suffer for eternity, and from this origin story, a virulent strain of sexism began to solidify. Prevailing archetypes of womanhood in the Bible become virgin, obedient wife or deviant whore. “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” states Exodus 22:18, a directive flanked by advice on how to buy a bride and why you shouldn’t commit bestiality.

As cultural historian Riane Eisler theorizes in *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, “If we read the Bible as normative social literature, the absence of the Goddess is the single most important statement about the kind of social order that the men who over many centuries wrote and rewrote this religious document strove to establish and uphold.”

When Christianity began to take root in Europe during the first millennium, conflict began to brew between newly minted devotees and those steeped in goddess-worshipping, nature-based faiths. At the time, many people still dedicated themselves to Diana, Roman goddess of the hunt, the moon, and childbirth; and Hecate, Greek goddess of the moon, the crossroads, and witchcraft. According to historian John Demos, many also looked toward folk healers, often called “cunning folk,” to engage in practices that would aid love, sex, prosperity, and fertility, using spells, remedies, “fortune-telling, conjuring and countless other practices so humble and obscure they left no traceable record.”

These wise women and men would become part of the narrative of witchcraft. However, it wasn’t until the Black Plague had wiped out over a third of Europe and Christianity had been molded around a sharp duality between God and the Devil that the stage was properly set for the witch’s debut.

By the early modern era, the archetypal witch embodied the fear of female flesh unchained. Devious and obscene, everything about her flew in the face of patriarchal authority. Although Christians did believe in male witches and many men were accused of witchcraft, to discuss witches and witch persecution without addressing the woman-as-witch mythos would be to ignore a robust canon of art, literature, and scripture that conflates femininity with devilry.

“The history of witchcraft is primarily a history of women,” explains Carol F. Karlsen in *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*.

To study this history is to peer into the abyss of fear, sexist violence, and toxic masculinity that dominates feminist discourse today.

“All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is, in women, insatiable.”

—*The Malleus Maleficarum*, 1486

Life in the fifteenth century was far from easy. Most folks were hard pressed to explain the widespread death, disease, and daily hardships they faced, and evil was the simplest scapegoat. Add this propensity for superstition on the part of the Catholic Church to local governments hungry to suppress dissent and assert their dominance, and you have a recipe for conflict.

When the printing press was invented in the mid-1400s, religious propaganda about heathen servants of Satan began to replicate like a viral meme. In these dastardly texts, witches were blamed for a host of everyday maladies and misfortunes, from infant mortality and illness to poor crops and infertility. There was no occurrence too large or too small to attribute to sorcery.

One tome in particular, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, rose above the rest as an exemplary repository of anti-witch sentiments, and catapulted the female sorceress to fearful new heights. It held a treasure trove of quotable quotes, and its chief author, a German Catholic friar and inquisitor named Heinrich Kramer, remains one of witch hunting’s most notorious trolls.

Men of the cloth were supposed to be celibate for life, and Kramer knew his audience. What better way to spice up a text about heresy than to make it sexy? *The Malleus Maleficarum* inspired countless cruel deaths, but was also pretty much ye olde medieval BDSM erotica.

It was an entertaining—perhaps even one-handed read—and it’s likely certain elite readers at the time thought so, too. Barely a few chapters past the introduction, this diabolical book first published in 1486 covers such burning questions as “the method in which witches copulate with Incubus devils,” “whether the act is always accompanied by the injection of semen,” and “whether witches may work some prestidigitatory illusion so that the male organ appears to be entirely removed and separate from the body.”

There's also a fantastical description of witches stealing penises and keeping them as pets in a bird's nest with other lonely, disembodied penises that crawl amongst each other and feast on a diet of corn and oats. (You can't make this stuff up.)

Despite being disavowed by the Catholic Church in 1490, *The Malleus Maleficarum* "marks a change in Church attitudes," art historian Jane Schuyler explains. In the early medieval era, witches were viewed as mostly benign, "seen as isolated misfits with weird ways that could aid or harm," she writes. Witches of the Renaissance, however, "were held to be heretics in league with the Devil, opposed to the rule of God on earth; they were seductive and immoral, and received their powers as gifts from Satan."

They were also most likely women. This new breed of witch reflected "a pulling together of misogynous attitudes from many different sources and centuries," notes John Demos. And once rumors about their wicked ways began to spread, all hell broke loose.

Sudden tragedies and inexplicable occurrences were cause for suspicion, and a minor interpersonal quarrel or a wayward temperament could spark an inquisition into maleficium. When a woman couldn't conceive? Witchcraft. When a surly old widow uttered an unkind word? Witchcraft. When a young woman refused the advances of a man? Witchcraft.

With little recourse, mothers, sisters, and daughters were accused of witchcraft by husbands, family members, neighbors, local officials, kings, and the clergy. These women were aged widows, middle-aged women, teenagers, and misfits of all classes. At times, men would bear the brunt of witchcraft accusations—but it was often older, poor women who paid the price. 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.

Although some places were barely touched by the savage campaign against witches, Germany, France, Poland, Hungary,

The Netherlands, Scandinavia, and the British Isles all succumbed to varying degrees. Laws and lore varied from region to region, so procedures differed, but the fear of witchcraft was endemic.

"We know now that witchcraft beliefs were not a monolith of concretized superstitions inherited from the Middle Ages but an evolving bundle of ideas, often with unresolved internal contradictions," clarifies Linda C. Hults in *The Witch As Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe*.

Both the Catholic and newly minted Protestant authorities as well as secular government officials were involved in witchcraft trials, but it was the civil courts that would execute the most people. The witch-as-wicked-woman trope may have gotten its start in the church, but the state ran with it, and witchcraft morphed from heresy to treason—a crime against the community itself.

As witchcraft was usually considered a *crimen exceptum*,* the trials and treatment of suspects were rarely by the book. Confessions were crucial to such cases, as the crimes were impossible to witness. After a suspect was arrested, she would usually be stripped naked and probed for any tell-tale markings that might betray her alliance with the Devil: a mole, an extra nipple, a birthmark. Then, she would be forced to endure all manner of torture, from whipping, compressing, and stretching to psychological tactics like solitary confinement and lengthy, aggressive interrogations. If she had a fortune or a family, both would be threatened. Christian women were indoctrinated with narratives about the lurking evils of womanhood from their youth, so it stands to reason they could succumb to the belief that they, too, were the Devil's handmaidens—particularly if they had ever committed a sin of any kind. Given this level of torment, it's a wonder everyone didn't crack under pressure and own up to committing nefarious acts at Satan's behest.

"Few witches failed to provide at least some confessional

* *Crimen exceptum*: an exceptional crime prosecuted outside legal convention.

material that came from experience and drew on the details of daily life,” confirms Lyndal Roper in *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany*. This could be anything from the way the Devil’s love gun felt during unholy intercourse (cold and hard) to what the witches’ sabbaths were like (killer parties, basically).

Most confessions walked a fine line between pleasure and horror, as both “Catholics and Protestants were convinced that pleasurable sensory experience could be deeply sinful,” Roper continues. But whatever admissions of “guilt” were eventually produced can hardly be trusted. The process was corrupt to the core.

Ironically, it was largely because of the witch trials that a woman’s testimony would come to be admissible. Up until that time, women were considered dependents of their husbands or male family members and were mostly ignored by European courts.

Anne Barstow details in *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* how little the legal system paid attention to women until they began to be accused of witchcraft in the mid-sixteenth century. “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,” she writes.

Certain types of women—adulteresses, fornicators, and midwives—were singled out as exponentially more evil in *The Malleus Maleficarum*, but it’s unclear how often they were put to death in comparison to other victims. Some accounts of the era suggest mostly cunning folk, midwives, or healers were targeted. Others offer alternative explanations.

The writers of the women’s health treatise *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* say, “It’s impossible for scholars to offer statistically firm generalizations about the occupation of women accused of witchcraft: usually, the convicted person’s occupation was not recorded.”

The number of accused witches executed by the church and state also remains unclear. Some feminist writers have put forth reckonings in the millions. In the past few decades, other historians have recalibrated those figures, including Roper, who places the estimate at more than fifty thousand people executed between the late fifteenth and eighteenth centuries—75-80 percent of whom were women.

Barstow explains how difficult it is to settle on a number of “witch” executions. “Working with the statistics of witchcraft is like working with quicksand,” she writes, citing destroyed and incomplete records, as well as the unknown numbers of those who died in jail, were murdered after they were acquitted, or committed suicide due to witchcraft stigma. Her estimate is two hundred thousand people accused of witchcraft and one hundred thousand put to death—85 percent of whom were women.

We’ll never know the exact number. But quibbling over statistics can obscure the focal point—women were predominantly targeted and female sexuality was centered as a culprit.

“The themes of the witch trials recur with monotonous regularity across Western Europe, featuring sex with the Devil, harm to women in childbed, and threats to fertility,” Roper writes, “all issues which touch centrally on women’s experience.”



“I will slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up, blond slut . . . those girls I’ve desired so much. They have all rejected me and looked down on me as an inferior man.”

—Elliot Rodger, Isla Vista Shooter, 2014

Women remain demonized in the third millennium.

In America, they are persecuted in the public and private spheres by individual men and entire bodies of male legislators. They are targets for sexual assault, sexual harassment, and

laws limiting reproductive rights and abortion access. They are targets of Planned Parenthood gunmen and misogynistic extremists like Isla Vista shooter Elliot Rodger, the twenty-two-year-old who killed six and injured fourteen people in 2014 as vicious payback for his perceived sexual failings. And when women aren't being physically attacked, they are publicly shamed—particularly those who campaign for sexual freedom and reproductive rights.

Witch, meet slut.

In 2012, Georgetown University student Sandra Fluke was called a “slut” and a “prostitute” by conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh for testifying at a Congressional meeting on birth control in favor of contraception access.

“If we are going to pay for your contraceptives, and thus pay for you to have sex, we want something for it, and I’ll tell you what it is,” he announced to his listeners. “We want you to post the videos online so we can all watch.”

High-profile women are similarly besieged. Model, entrepreneur, and activist Amber Rose has faced threats, mockery, and stigmatization from strangers and famous exes alike because of her vocal pride in being a former stripper who identifies as a “Certified Slut.”

A uniquely twenty-first-century slut-witch hunt is well under way. But inquiring minds want to know: what does it take to earn the hallowed title of “slut”?

As with being called a witch in the Renaissance era, logic and reason have little to do with it.

To be a slut doesn't require being a sex worker, a nude selfie-taker, or a promiscuous woman. Jessica Valenti, author of *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*, sums up the definition of the “s-word” in the title of an article she wrote for *The Guardian* called “What makes a slut? The only rule, it seems, is being female.”

Although any woman can be deemed a slut, more explicit erotic actions are an express ticket to the top of the list. And contrary to what some might think, slut-shaming (aka being

judged for your real or perceived sexual expression) isn't solely perpetrated by men.

A 2014 study by a cross-party think tank found that women on Twitter slut-shame other women almost as much as men do.

A 2013³ study by Cornell University published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* found that female participants rated a hypothetical woman with twenty sexual partners “as less competent, emotionally stable, warm, and dominant” than a hypothetical woman who had only had two.

This same-sex prejudice was alive and well during the witch-hunting era, when women frequently accused other women of witchcraft.

“Women—and other oppressed groups—sometimes try to outdo their oppressors in scorning persons perceived as outsiders, in hope of being accepted, or tolerated, themselves,” writes Anne Barstow in *Witchcraze*. “In the witchcraft trials, the poor attacked those even poorer; marginalized women attacked those women even further out of power than they.”

Even Amber Rose admits to being a former slut-shamer.

“I used to call women sluts and whores all the time,” she told *The Guardian*. “Because that's what society taught me: that that was OK and that it was what I was supposed to be doing. . . . But I grew up, and I have seen these issues, and I have become very passionate about it. I am a former slut-shamer and a newfound feminist.”

To combat the contemporary epidemic of slut-shaming, victim-blaming, and sexual assault, Rose has hosted multiple SlutWalks in Los Angeles. Originating in 2011 in Toronto, the SlutWalk movement was inspired by one police officer's comment that women could avoid harassment and assault if they stopped “dressing like sluts.” Since then, SlutWalks have been held all over the world, from Rio de Janeiro to New Delhi, with varied success in highlighting issues of race, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation within the discourse on sexual assault.

As a queer woman of color who grew up poor, Amber Rose's involvement with the SlutWalk has arguably helped to

deflect its designation away from that of a straight, middle-class white woman's movement. Whatever critiques have been leveled at the SlutWalk, however, its global impact in challenging rape culture is undeniable.

Named by feminists in the 1970s, rape culture is the pernicious discourse that normalizes violence against women through everything from jokes, advertisements, and films to national laws and criminal procedures. Rape culture is teaching women how to avoid rape instead of teaching men not to rape. It's the song that glamorizes coercive sex. It's the narrative that says most reports of sexual assault are false. It's the light sentence given to a young male rapist because the judge believes he has a promising future. It's the rape joke and the audience that laughs along.

The editors of *Transforming a Rape Culture* describe rape culture as "a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent . . . [and] women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the *norm*."

During the witch trials, physical and emotional terrorism against women was indeed the norm. Although sexism was expressed differently in the early modern era, destructive male hegemony motivated by religious, political, and economic interests remains largely intact today. As the initial parallels between the witch and the slut reveal, slut-shaming and rape culture are poisonous blooms from the seeds of misogyny sown centuries ago. When Europeans began to cross the Atlantic, they brought this legacy of brutality to American soil, where it would take root in disturbing new ways.