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'Better the devil you know': feminine sexuality and patriarchal liberation in *The Witch*

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ABSTRACT

At the end of 1615's *The Witch*, isolated and beaten protagonist, Thomasin, ultimately rejects her puritanical upbringing to become a witch, accepting the invitation of the Devil (in the guise of the family's goat Black Philip). This essay will discuss Thomasin's sexual deliverance in terms of her turning away from the authoritarian 'Law of the Father' towards female liberation that comes in the form of the Witch. Thomasin transitions from girl to woman, but does not want to do so in the restrictive Puritan fashion where patriarchy and oppression rules. She becomes a woman by embracing her sexuality in the figure of the witch and Black Philip as the figure of lust helping her become free. Western folklore posits the goat as a symbol of fertility, independence, and lust; Black Philip is a figure who represents a connection to wild desires. Therefore, Black Philip becomes not only a physical representation of the devil, but also a symbolic representation of Thomasin's sexual desire. Drawing on theories of the monstrous-feminine (Creed, Kristeva, Arnold), the symbolism of folklore and Freud's Electra complex, this work argues that, despite its message of feminine empowerment, *The Witch* cannot fully reject or escape patriarchal discourse.

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Introduction

The Witch opens in the 1630s as a Puritan family is expelled from a settlement in New England due to the father speaking out against what he perceives as the community's 'ungodly' behaviour. Alongside the parents, William (Ralph Ineson) and Katherine (Kate Dickie), their children Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw), twins Mercy and Jonas (Ellie Grainger and Lucas Dawson), and the infant Samuel (Axton Henry Dube) are also forced to leave the safety of the settlement's walls. Setting up their new farm on the outskirts of a forest, every attempt the family makes to survive in this new, hostile environment is thwarted and they begin to starve. Their presence seemingly disturbs a witch living in the woods, who attacks the family through the children, first by kidnapping and murdering baby Samuel, and then later by bewitching Caleb. The mother, Katherine, blames Thomasin for the boys' deaths as she was with them both when they disappeared, her suspicions exacerbated by the twins who call Thomasin evil and a witch

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at the behest of the family's black billy-goat, Black Philip. The twins claim that Black Philip is able to speak to them, and although this is never explicitly confirmed (Black Philip's voice is not heard and the children remain silent when asked directly), it is heavily implied that this has actually been the case. Unsure what to believe, William locks all three of his surviving children in the barn with the goats, where they are later visited by the witch. Meanwhile, Katherine is confronted by visions of Samuel and Caleb. In the morning, William discovers the barn wrecked, the goats slain and the twins vanished, leaving only a sleeping Thomasin. He is suddenly and brutally gored to death by Black Philip while Thomasin stares on in shock. On seeing her husband's body, Katherine attacks her daughter, screaming that she has been responsible for all the family's misfortunes. Thomasin is forced to kill her mother with a billhook and later confronts Black Philip, who transforms into a man and asks her if she would 'like to live deliciously'. Thomasin agrees, and the film ends as she slowly walks nude through the trees before coming upon a group of witches celebrating sabbat around a fire who begin to levitate (see Robbins, 1959; 2015, pp.418–420 for a more detailed analysis of a witch's sabbat). The final shot of the film is a close-up of Thomasin lit by firelight as she too is lifted into the air, where she begins to laugh in 'pure ecstasy' (Eggers, 2016, p. 137).

Whilst the Devil and his witches offer Thomasin the liberation and pleasure of disrupted social structures, her autonomy is still called into question. The overwhelming father's voice that dictates the family's fate at the beginning of the film is merely replaced by the Devil's. The first and last lines of the film are spoken by patriarchal authority figures who are positioned either fully or partially out of frame. The Devil offers Thomasin luxuries, but she is still under his rule, to the point that he will 'guide her hand' as she writes her name.

Seventeenth-century new england witchcraft

Before Europeans thoroughly established their colonies in America, it was communally accepted amongst citizens and that church that magic was commonly practised by 'cunning folk'. Magic at this time was considered as an aid, offering help to sick people or protection for families and communities. However, over time the Protestant vein of Christianity began to seek a divide between magic wielders and their divine followers, claiming that magic was a power that should not be used unless it was for God. These Protestants divided and became Puritans who sought a new, godlier way of life, away from 'wise folk' and magic and towards religious extremity. They departed across the Atlantic to seek fresh territory in New England. Magic was no longer accepted, and anyone discovered to be magic users were demonised as witches, as Devils' slaves, and as turning against God and the church to be deviants and evil miscreants. Social deviance as a rebellion against God and thus towards the Devil became witchcraft, and, influenced by the now infamous writings from the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), most of these Devil-worshipping witches were female.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* came from agents of the Catholic church and was seen as documentation about Witchcraft and its threat to societies. Written by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, it argued that women were the weaker sex and thus more vulnerable to the Devil's possession. Amongst the many claims the *Malleus* made, there were beliefs about what witches were capable of, including: making pacts with the devil; putting flying

ointment onto broomsticks to ride them; having demonic sex and fornication; keeping penises as pets; cursing crops and livestock; eating children; and committing general blasphemy against God. The predominant belief was that these mainly female witches sold their souls to the devil in order to receive 'delicious' things and supernatural powers in return. As the seventeenth century in New England progressed, accusations and fear of witchcraft increased, with retaliation growing stronger against those who deviated from the community and social norms. These accusations of deviance and witchcraft became especially potent when centred around motherhood because, at the time, having fewer children was seen as disrespectful to social norms as well as reducing the labour value of the communities. Witches were women who did not bear many if any, children, and thus, in the eyes of the Puritans, rejected motherhood in favour of the corruption of the Devil: Devil's corruption or the corrupting sway/influence of the devil

In Puritan society, women were held to strict expectations, and motherhood was considered the most significant aspect of female identity and an inherent ability [W]omen who did not adhere to feminine expectations were at risk of genuinely believing they were witches as they were so thoroughly permeated by religious ideologies that they considered themselves vile and evil by nature. (Carroll, 2019, p 5)

The Puritan culture of the seventeenth century established a historical patriarchal system that brought the villainisation of women as witches to the forefront of our social history. Puritan culture relied heavily upon not only its deeply rooted religious values, but also misogyny and patriarchal rules. As Carroll (2019) states:

Puritan men harboured a deep suspicion of women as potentially willing and able to disrupt the social and moral order, assigning women roles within society which dictated that they remain submissive and obedient to the male heads of family and society. (p 5)

As a horror film, *The Witch* presents historical Puritan vilified religious roots to represent the Puritans as a metaphorical threat to culture, one that threatens to return us to their traditional, misogynistic values, suggesting that the witch – the feminine – is a response to this oppression. The Puritans historically depicted witches as the enemy, alongside the Devil, yet they were indeed the enemy themselves, offering judgement, hatred, and patriarchal oppression of women. As Carroll states: 'Ultimately Puritan settlers did not find the Devil in New England; they brought it with them' (Carroll, 2019, p. 6).

Witches as women: women as witches

And so in this twilight and evening of the world when sin is flourishing on every side and every place when charity is growing old, the evil of witches and their iniquities superabound (*Malleus Maleficarum*, 1487)

Asked what comes to mind on hearing the word 'witch', various stereotypes and archetypes come to mind: haggard and old women with warts on their noses, flying broomsticks with pointy hats; wiccan women who derive power from nature and grow herbs in their gardens; or more modern and empowered television portrays such as Sabrina. What these all have in common is that they are usually female and almost always stereotyped. As previously mentioned, the *Malleus Maleficarum* written in the fifteenth century remains largely responsible for the misogynistic depictions of women as witches. Due to its

patriarchal writings, women were seen as a threat to the social male order, and despite the Catholic church disavowing it in 1490, the fear it embedded within the cultural consciousness meant that it was too late to remove this unease from society. The *Maleficarum* also contributed heavily to gendering witchcraft with the misogynistic 'where there are women, there are witches' view. Women became targeted for their role in witchcraft and the Devil's dealings and so mistrust of women became firmly placed within the culture of the time. As Carroll mentions, 'Throughout Western history, the witch has existed as a gendered entity' (Carroll, 2019, p. 1).

Through time and our social history, however, witches have transcended their demonic roots and become more culturally accepted, not only on our film and television screens, and literature but within society itself. Yet, the stereotype does still remain and its historical roots play a fundamental role in our understanding of women and their development through patriarchal oppression over the years. As Zwissler (2018) comments: 'There is power in embodying the witch stereotype, there is power in deconstructing the witch stereotype (p.19). The archetype of the hag witch – the ugly, old, broomstick flying, wood-dwelling witch predominant in fairy tales, offers herself up as a way for society to interrogate its own rapidly changing societal issues of the time:

The hag witch can be considered doubly transgressive for refusing to take up the mantle of invisibility required of aging women. Instead, she embraces her barren body as a source of power, spectacle and magic, becoming an image of unruly excess. The hag witch makes a mockery of the laws and boundaries that structure the symbolic order through her spectacular magic. (Crowther, 2019, p 3)

The early concept of witches in league with the Devil throughout medieval Europe soon brought about the stereotype of the Satanic or Diabolical witch. She is described as 'a malicious female magic user who derives her power from her voluntary enslavement to Satan and who practices the three abominations of heresy; infanticide, cannibalism and indiscriminate sex' (Zwissler, 2018, p. 2). The Satanic Witch stereotype became ultimately responsible for driving witch hunts throughout Europe and beyond, and whilst witches have since transcended their evil hag, satanic slave boundaries, the Satanic/Diabolical witch stigma lives on at Halloween, in fairy tales and in Hollywood (*The Wizard of Oz* [1939]; *The Witches* [1990]; *Hocus Pocus* [1993]; *Stardust* [2007]; *Into the Woods* [2014] and so on). Embedded within these heinous views of diabolical witches and witchcraft, lies the marginalised woman as the Othered gender cast out, with the witch marked as different, deviant, and Satanic simply for belonging to the part of society that dared to go against patriarchal norms. As Zwissler notes: 'Within the dichotomous frame of diabolical witchcraft, all difference is Satanic. In an androcentric world, women are Satanic. In a white settler world, Native people are Satanic. In a Calvinist world, all religious difference is Satanic' (2018, p.9). Puritan patriarchy revolved around the control of women; women were forced into the role of marginalised Others if they (intentionally or not) disobeyed the restricted rules of their communities. Therefore, the witch was not only a form of rebellion, but a symbolic declaration of female independence. As Zwissler states, 'If a witch is a woman who is not doing what men want her to do, then she is the original feminist and today's feminists are just the newest witches' (Zwissler, 2018, pp. 14–15). Whilst much of modernity now accepts that Christianity developed Satan and the Devil, and that Wicca and witchcraft belonged to a pre-Christian belief of nature and Paganism,

the stereotype lives on in Western society's collective consciousness and represents a form of marginalised Other and, most importantly, women. Egger's film here depicts the 'witch' as evil; a child-murderer; a cannibal; as devil-worshipping; and ultimately portrayed as monstrous Other. The witch kidnaps and kills Thomasin's baby brother Samuel and this form of stereotypical witch that harms children is typical of folkloric tales whereby witches live in the woods and will eat children to ensure their own survival and perhaps vitality. For instance; Hansel and Gretel (1812) is a classic tale of a cannibalistic witch in the woods who entices children with a gingerbread house and then cages them to be eaten. A more contemporary version of the witches who murders for her own gain occurs throughout *American Arnold* (2013). The witches and their obsession with youth and vitality underpins much of the series, with both Supreme Fiona Goode and Delphine LaLaurie employing murder and torture in their attempts to preserve their youth, including the murder of infants and applying blood to the skin. The series also features Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans who made a pact to ensure her power and youth remain as long as she murders and sacrifices a baby.

The witch is an abject figure and has long been considered to belong to the borders of society, outside the norm. The figure of the stereotypical witch does not respect these borders, however, and prefers to disturb the order of our cultures with threats to the patriarchal rule and communal religions and rules. Abjection as a concept refers often to the expulsion of that which threatens the social order; their bodies and lives do not matter and must be expelled in order to keep the ideologies of man. Both witches and women have historically been deemed as 'monstrous' and abject because they do not fit in with the social order of patriarchy at times. Their defiance to be submissive, to obey man, or to keep within their limited social structure has caused patriarchal cultures to abject them from social communities. As Barbara Creed states:

Definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection – particularly in relation to the following religious 'abomination', sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest. (Creed, 1993, p 6)

This representation of the witch as, alongside the link to femininity means that she has been marked for many years as a monstrous-feminine figure:

As a monstrous woman, she is literally a predator of the patriarchy. She is a violent rejection of women's reduction to motherhood and confinement within nuclear family. It is precisely *because* she struck such terror in the hearts of early modern man, and conforming women, that she becomes available as a symbol of resistance against the oppressive structures (Zwissler, 2018, p 21)

Despite the prevalent image of the witch as a monstrous-diabolic hag that ate children and worked with the Devil, over the centuries she has become a powerful allegory for the transcendence of patriarchy and indeed a symbol of liberation from female oppression. She now represents female empowerment as well as freedom from the constraints of patriarchy and marginalisation. For centuries, there has been a power struggle between men and women, with patriarchy usually in control over ruled and oppressed women, condemning the disobedient as witches, deviants or hysterics that can be institutionally disposed of. As Michel Foucault's workings on power and oppression posits, it is this form

of rebellion that can overturn compliance and oppression eventually, stating ‘the main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much . . . an institution of power or group, or elite, or class but rather a technique, a form of power’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

During the first wave of feminism, ‘Women were not witches, men just thought they were and were horrifically wrong’ (Zwissler, 2018, p. 12). The Second wave brought out the female differences that men so feared, and this was then articulated as Satanic and evil. It did not matter if these women practised magic or claimed supernatural powers: as women, they still threatened men in power and so their status as witches became irrelevant. Witches are women: sexual beings, hags, offering untamed power against patriarchy and thus binarized against fertility, submissiveness and social conformity. They are ‘an untamed force of female solidarity and represent a threat to the . . . social structure’ (Carroll, 2019, p. 7). The Third wave of feminism aided the witch in transcending boundaries to become a transgressive woman of power and liberation (The *Craft* [1996], *Practical Magic* [1996], *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* [1996], *Charmed* [1998–2006]). The current view of witches in contemporary literature, art and media connects the witch to the history of persecution, bringing her back in time to reclaim her historical power: (*Salem* [2014–2017]; *Motherland: Fort Salem* [2020–2022]; *Fate The Winx Saga* [2021–2022]; *Shadow and Bone* [2021]; *Fear Street* [2021]; *School of Good and Evil* [2022]; *Mayfair Witches* [2023]). As Carroll posits: ‘Throughout feminist waves, the witch has transcended her vilified position and restraints of socially constructed femininity to embrace her powerful position and combat patriarchy’s attempt to subdue her’ (2019, p.2). Modern witches, such as Willow Rosenberg (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1997–2003]), Hermione Granger (*Harry Potter* [2001–2011]), Bonnie Bennet (*The Vampire Diaries* [2009–2017]) represent a newer, more transgressive, witch who defies patriarchy by embodying the empowered independent female, free of oppression and breaking through the stigmatised and suppressive boundaries that she has been pushed into since history and fair-tales began to do so. She, the witch, has become a metaphor for women who resist patriarchal rules.

The witch as metaphor for female resistance, witches as representative of women who lead unconventional lives-outside that which patriarchal society deemed acceptable in relation, for instance, to female-centred communities or sisterhoods, personal and sexual freedom and political resistance and who were punished for this (Mosley, 2002, p. 410)

The figure of the witch in contemporary times represents the binaries offered to both women and witches for centuries: she is both a female authority and a scapegoat; she is both oppressed and empowered; she is both victim and heroine. Gerely (2021) mentions: ‘[As] symbols of self-actualisation, self-empowerment and self-love, witches are people who transcend the binaries and the oppressive forces that hold them down’ (p.3).

The modern, alternative view of witches is to no longer see her as a monster ‘but as a noble rebel against patriarchal Christianity’ (Zwissler, 2018, p. 3). This new wave of witches have undergone a cultural reworking of what it is to be a witch. They are no longer the hag, the crone, or the banished, but the accepted, intelligent, and independent female, while still acknowledging their historical oppressed roots steeped in rich histories of being vilified, hunted, and having survived social ordeals to be where they are today. Zwissler notes that modern witches are ‘non-satanic, non-baby murdering witches who have become common among cultural currency independent of past fairy-tales’ (Zwissler, 2018, p. 15), going on to write that:

The witch is no longer understood as the terrorist she was to the early moderns in contemporary Pagan and Feminist revisioning, she is the opposite of everything Christianity once ascribed to her. She is kind to children, magnanimous to those in need and often vegetarian. No babies . . . were harmed in the making of this witch (Zwissler, 2018, pp. 21–22)

From the days of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996–2000), *Bewitched* (1964–1972), *Practical Magic* (1998), witches progressed into a form of female empowerment, yet also remained domesticated within their roles as women. Recently the witch has returned to her historical roots as a feminist folk-heroine, and we now watch or read about witches as victims, and heroines, rebelling against the clear patriarchal rules that constrain and vilify them, sometimes to the point of death.

Robert Egger's *The Witch* brings forth the historical persecutory fear of the witch and witchcraft in seventeenth century New England and blends it with contemporary feminism and sexual salvation from patriarchy through Thomasin's liberation as an oppressed young female in both her community and her family's patriarchal rules and expectations. However, it is not only her father and community that she must escape to be free as a woman; in joining with the Devil and his witches in the wilderness, the film brings forth the concept of folk horror landscapes, isolation and links witches, nature and animals to ensure that Thomasin's journey from a girl to young woman is just as horrific as her real-life predecessors who were deemed witches in historical New England.

Animals and nature: the folk horror landscape of *The Witch*

Adam Scovell's folk horror analysis in *Folk Horror: Hours Strange and Things Dreadful* (2017) highlights two pertinent parts of the folk horror chain that *The Witch* represents well alongside its return to Puritan traditions and fear of witchcraft: the landscape and isolation. With the Puritans arriving in New England, there is the theme of unwelcome colonisation of new lands and with it what was seen as alien settlements and their religious extremism and communities' values, offering a threat to both the landscape and its inhabitants.

In *The Witch*, the family arrive from England in the 1630s to New England and help to build a fenced community within its wilderness. Set in a time when the Devil was believed to be real, but before witch trials were developed, and that unknown supernatural creature could reside in the wilderness and forests, *The Witch* offers a folk horror theme of fears surrounding not only witchcraft, but that of the newly settled upon wild landscape. This fear of the unknown in the outer areas of settlements and communities is a common trope in folk horror films (*The Village* [2004]). With the added threat of the insular community itself, the environment threatens the Puritan settlers with a sentient and mysterious landscape: out there is dangerous; out there is unknown; out there is evil. The colonising community is itself a threatening alien invasion to the lawless wilderness, and when the Puritan settlements crops fail and decay it is a sign that the landscape itself is unwelcoming towards them. The toxic and hostile landscape rejects *The Witch's* central family's attempt to invade and colonise it, with the wild space invading the boundaries of the farm to thwart its domestication. The family's crops appear to be suffering from ergotism or ergot poisoning: a fungus that infects cereal grains such as rye. Ingestion can lead to cardiovascular or neurological difficulties, as well as gangrene and

convulsions. Therefore, some scholars have suggested that the Salem Witch trials were, at least partly, influenced by an outbreak of ergot in nearby crops. However, other sources refute the connection, noting that there is little statistical evidence between ergot poisoning and the events in Salem (Nicolas P. Spanos & Gottlieb, 1976, pp. 13.90—1394). Additionally, in the film, William is seen harvesting corn rather than the cereal plants susceptible to ergot. Nevertheless, it can be argued that consumption of rotting and potentially infected food is the real cause of the paranoia, hysteria, hallucinations and convulsions that the family experience.

The sentient forest destabilises the family after it has left the community and been cast beyond the safety of their walls. The landscape seeks to destroy them; representing an uncivilised, feared wilderness it connects fear of the wild uncivilised new landscape and fear of witchcraft and the Devil, as both Nature and witches have been linked together for centuries. As Simon Bacon explains: '[The] ancient woodlands often harbour dark forces that do not take kindly to human incursion, particularly when the invaders are unwelcome human colonisers representing change and exploitation of natural resources' (Bacon, 2020, p. 2)

Eventually, Thomasin abandons all Puritan modernity and the colonising religion she came with to embrace the natural indigenous landscape and its ancient powers – she is no longer a threat to the folk horror landscape and instead is welcomed to become a part of it. Bacon (2020) speaks of the dangers of the 'alien landscape and religious extremism' (Bacon, 2020, p. 76) in *The Witch*, noting 'the environment outside the compound is one that is inherently dangerous, a world beyond the strictures of spiritual and social guidance that keep the faithful safe' (Bacon, 2020, p. 76). The strict social rules are deeply embedded in the Law of the Father, meaning that while the family's intrusion into the uncivilised wilderness is dangerous and unstable, it also offers the possibility of liberation. Bacon (2020) writes that the forest contains, 'dark forces that do not take kindly to human incursion, particularly when the invaders are unwelcome human colonisers representing change and the exploitation of natural resources' (p.76). These dark forces work to isolate Thomasin, to destroy the patriarchal and religious rules that have kept her safe (but also restricted) until now. Ultimately, Thomasin is absorbed by the wilderness, removing her clothes in a 'symbolic shedding of the world she is now leaving to be provided with new clothes that belong to this ancient ecosystem' (Bacon, 2020, p. 79). The forest has gorged itself on the blood of her family, energising the environment with female power. As Thomasin begins to levitate alongside the other witches, she '[abandons] the modernity of the Old World for the ancient powers of the New and an environment that protects itself from outsiders' (Bacon, 2020, p. 79).

The final close-up of Thomasin's face and shoulders echoes the shot that introduces her at the beginning of the film. In that scene, she listens in shock as her family is banished from the Puritan settlement. Although obviously distressed, she tries to keep her expression deliberately blank, at the mercy of her as-yet unseen father's voice. The opening scene is lit coldly – a harsh light with grey overtones – and Thomasin wears modest clothes with a high collar, her hair pinned back under a head covering and hat. In direct contrast, the final scene is lit by the warm amber glow of the fire and Thomasin is freed from the restrictions of clothing and what it represents, wearing her long hair loose around her shoulders. Thomasin's distraught expression is replaced by laughter 'ever increasing in pleasure and freedom' (Eggers, 2016, p. 137); the mournful cello that plays in

the background of the opening scene replaced by an unsettling cacophony of wailing and discordant notes, obliterating any potential dialogue or any residual sense of the symbolic father's voice.

At various moments throughout the film, the witch is seen in the form of a hare observing the family and leading Caleb away through the woods. Hares have a particular significance in the discourse of witchcraft. Both a popular familiar as well as considered a supernatural creature in their own right, hares were frequently blamed for misfortunes such as spoilt milk, while some witches were thought to be able to take the form of the hare itself, as is the case in the film.

Like rabbits, hares belong to the *Leporidae* family and, as such, their monstrous form incites many of the same anxieties as their shorter-eared brethren. MK Pinder explains that rabbits represent the threat of invasion, overpopulation and plague (Pinder, 2022, pp. 121–122), all themes that recur throughout the film. In fact, Pinder asserts that 'The main threat that rabbits pose to humans is food scarcity' (Pinder, 2022, p. 121), creating a parallel between the presence of the hare and the lack of food on the farm: the crops do not grow and the animals are too clever to be caught.

Furthermore, although the rabbit 'does not pose a direct physical threat to humans', this in fact '[makes] their positioning as monstrous all the uncannier and unsettling' (Pinder, 2022, p. 121). The hare that carefully watches the family stares at them fearlessly, far more predator than prey, instantly destabilising human-animal and hunter-victim dynamics. This disruption of so-called natural roles is reflected back into the family: parental roles are filled by children; daughter Thomasin questions the authority of both her father and God; and babies are replaced by animals. Nature refuses to be brought to rule by human structures and expectations, both within the family and their surrounding environment.

However, the primary animal adversary that in the film is the family's goat, Black Philip. In Western mythology, goats were commonly considered to be witch's familiars, mythologically representing virility/fertility, joy/desire and independence. Although the family's 'good' domestic animals die (the dog, horse and nanny goats), Black Philip is cast as a 'bad' animal and therefore thrives. From the outset, Black Philip is a symbol of the children's 'badness': Mercy and Jonas play with him roughly, insisting that he speaks to them with claims that Thomasin is a witch. For Thomasin herself, it is Black Philip that she ultimately turns to when she believes God has abandoned her; it is the Devil in Black Philip's form that not helps her, but offers the pleasures that she has been denied. He stands for the children's rebellion against their parents: Thomsin's desires and burgeoning sexuality and/or female empowerment, as well as the stubbornness, mischief and malice of the younger children. Black Philip, then, is not only an animal form of the Devil, but a projection of children's defiance and misbehaviour. In the same way, Bruno Bettelheim describes the wolf in stories such as 'The Three Little Pigs' as 'an externalisation, a projection of the child's badness' (Bettelheim, 1978;1991, p.44). Furthermore, Bettelheim's analysis of 'animal-groom' fairytales, such as 'Beauty and the Beast', posit that these tales offer the child 'the strength to realise that his fears are the creations of his anxious sexual fantasies' (Bettelheim, 1978;1991, p.306). *The Witch* parallels these animal-groom stories, with Thomasin pledging her fealty and devotion to the Devil in return for his favour and gifts. By signing his book, she becomes one of his many witch-wives. At this time, the Devil transforms between goat and human form, invoking his status as 'The

Bachelor'. Theresa Bane explains this as 'essentially a name that is applied to Satan when he is in the guise of a great he-goat', noting that he was believed to 'have sexual intercourse with witches in this form' (Theresa, 1969; 2012, p. 67). Losing her family perversely allows Thomasin to proclaim her independence and desires; her fears of losing her family can therefore also be read as a fear of independence and growing up. Bettelheim writes:

Children have a natural affinity to animals and often feel closer to them than to adults, wishing to share what seems like an animal's easy life of instinctual freedom and enjoyment. But with this affinity also comes the child's anxiety that he might not be quite as human as he ought to be. These fairy tales counteract this fear, by making animal existence a chrysalis from which a most attractive person emerges. (Bettelheim, 1978; 1991, p 290)

Thomasin initially rejects Black Philip, distrusting the 'instinctual freedom and enjoyment' that he appears to share with her younger siblings. However, she eventually aligns with him, and is rewarded for this when he transforms into the Devil's human form (transforming from animal to prince/husband). The Devil is able to counteract any anxieties Thomasin has about the potentially dehumanising aspect of becoming a witch-bride by metamorphizing into a 'most attractive person', both in what he can offer her and in his human form (Eggers, 2016, p. 136)

Thomasin's 'choice'

Eggers' film aims for historical authenticity, with a final girl and survivor being found within Thomasin as she fights to liberate herself from her Puritan roots and live free as a witch. Carroll notes, 'In this witch text, Thomasin is rewriting the victim narrative through the witch by shedding societal expectations and beginning to embrace her female power' (2018, p.5). As a female coming of age in a male-dominated society, she is forced into a battle for power and autonomy between herself and the patriarchal figures around her. *The Witch* offers a deeper and more meaningful cultural construction of the witch through Thomasin's journey to not only survive, but become a sexually liberated woman by returning the witch to her 'vilified roots'. Thomasin plays a fundamental role in her family's undoing after they are cast out of the community, but she is not responsible for their downfall. Rather, she becomes the scapegoat, demonised and blamed for their crisis and indeed the disappearances of the children, leaving her vulnerable to Other influences. Thomasin begs for forgiveness through Christian prayer:

I here confess I have lived in sin. I have been idle in my work, disobedient of my parents, neglectful of my prayer. I have in secret, played upon the Sabbath and broken every one of thy commandments in thoughts. Followed the desires of mine own will, and not thy Holy Spirit. I know I deserve all shame and misery in this life, and everlasting hellfire. But I beg thee, for the sake of thy Son, forgive me, show me mercy, show me thy lights.

This prayer thus begins her journey, away from Puritan religion – that marginalised both herself and her family – and her salvation is answered, not by God, but by Satan himself: 'Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst thou like to live deliciously? Wouldst thou like to see the world?'

In the film, Thomasin's movement away from her family and Puritan religion gradually pushes her towards the Devil and witchcraft. The patriarchal power struggles she endures

are between her Christian family and oppressive Father contrasted with patriarchal Devil and his witches. Thomasin becomes the contested property between her father and the Devil, despite her father attempting to maintain control of his daughter: 'The Devil hath no interest in Thee'. Thomasin is compelled towards witchcraft because she desires freedom, liberation and ultimately to be away from the Puritan condemnation that her family have thrust upon her. A family in crisis offers the perfect opportunity for the Devil's corruption to unfold as the family attacks Thomasin. As Carroll states: '[Thomasin] has departed from the narrative of the ideal Puritan girl and succumbed to the pressure of her role which, in Puritan values, transcribe to witchcraft' (2018, p.4). It is both her family and society that created the fictional witch in Thomasin as she becomes the family scapegoat. Thomasin has become Other and therefore must readjust herself within the margins of witchcraft. She turns away from her Puritan patriarchal values, and away from the patriarchal Law of the Father. She is becoming a woman and is persecuted for this by patriarchy – the only place left to turn is towards that of the witch, the liberator, the rebel against patriarchy, the marginalised woman.

While God does not answer Thomasin, she hears the Devil speak, both as Black Philip and in the form of a human. God offers nothing but demands fealty; the Devil offers a better life, but his authority is still absolute. Thomasin is forever bound to him, her name written in his book, calling into question how much freedom she actually has. Discussing why Thomasin would agree to a covenant with the Devil for such seemingly banal desires as 'the taste of butter' or 'a pretty dress', director Robert Eggers and historian David D. Hall note that people who confessed to being 'witches' in the 17th century had similarly simple wants, such as a pair of shoes (Eggers, 2016, p. 197). Speaking of Elizabeth Knapp, a Puritan adolescent believed to be possessed by the Devil in 1672, Hall points to Knapp's response when asked what the Devil offered her, to which she replied that the Devil would take the ashes from the fireplace. Hall notes that 'You fall over laughing when you see this, but you realise this is a fifteen-year-old girl who's sick to death being the slave, the domestic slave' (Eggers, 2016, p. 197), with Eggers adding that 'taking the ashes out seems silly and mundane [...] it's so ... it's sad' (Eggers, 2016, p. 198). Thomasin's constrained Puritan lifestyle, and upbringing within a family that already treats her as a suspicious, domestic object to be passed freely between households, restricts what luxuries and pleasures she can imagine. Butter and a dress may seem like trivial items, but they represent so much more to Thomasin, while the ability to travel in freedom is an almost unthinkable indulgence.

Thomasin's problems not only stem from her patriarchal father, but also from her sinfully jealous mother. Katherine embodies the Electra complex, in which rivalry between mother and daughter begins and fixation upon the father plays a role. As Mahrukh Khan and Kamal Haider put it: 'The Electra complex is the female form of the contention youngsters experience throughout the phallic stage' (Khan & Haider, 2015, p. 1). Films often represent this as the 'evil stepmother' or jealous 'phallic' mother archetypes found in fairytales ('Snow White' (1937), 'Cinderella' (1950), 'Hansel and Gretel' (1812)). The mother becomes replaced and rejected in place for the father, but in Thomasin's case, her own father pushes her away, to the point where the only father figure she can turn to is the Devil. Mother Katherine distrusts Thomasin's impending womanhood and even pleads with husband William to send her away to another family: 'Our daughter hath begat the sign of womanhood'. Through desiring freedom from her patriarchal

community, family and villainization from others, Thomasin desires sexual freedom and liberation to become the woman she feels she deserves to be.

In embracing her sexual awakening rather than suppressing it, Thomasin demonstrates her sexuality as a source of power and deconstructs the witch figure as a feminine monstrosity whilst combatting an oppressive social order. She is not villainous and deviant nor wicked in appearance, rather by embracing her Otherness and female sexuality she is vilified within Puritan culture (Carroll, 2018, p.6). By doing so, she invokes Robin Wood's work on Freud's theory of the Return of the Repressed, which imagines the repressed coming back in monstrous form (Wood, 1978, 24—32). Both Thomasin and eldest brother Caleb are forced to hide their sexual development and desires, believing them to be evidence of their innate sin. The corrupting influence of Caleb's sexual repression is clear: he is easily beguiled and seduced by the witch in the form of a beautiful woman, who kisses him to drain him of his life-force. While he is later returned to his family (albeit on the point of death), he vomits up a whole rotten apple (along with its connotations of original sin and sexual desire).

Furthermore, the film makes use of both yonic and phallic threatening imagery; the witch herself, for instance, employs both the phallic-looking knife and the enticement of her yonic-looking home to kill Samuel and Caleb respectively. The tension between binaries of sexual imagery reappears in the film's marketing materials. Some of the posters feature a close up of the head of Black Philip or the hare in profile against a black background; the shape of the creatures' heads appear similar, with a pointed face and half-erect protrusions from the top of the head (the goat's horns or hare's ears). In comparison, one of the film's other iconic posters features a silhouette of a nude Thomasin against the moonlight night as she walks through the woods (an image inspired by the final sequence of the film). When taken as a whole, this creates a yonic illustration, while also creating an aura of mystery and power. The images employed by marketing material, whether the goat and hare (both creatures that represent the equally dangerous and desirable side of virility and unnatural powers within the text) or the nude young woman walking steadily towards a magical but lethal Nature, are suggestive of the contentious relationship between supernatural and sexual powers found in *The Witch*.

With no healthy outlet for pubescent emotions, Caleb experiences a type of lust and/or sexual curiosity about his sister, staring at her breasts while she remains unaware. The relationship between Thomasin and Caleb is more maternal than incestuous, however; as well as protecting and caring for each other, the siblings embrace and play together by the river (in perhaps the only joyful moment in the film). Caleb attempts to take on the paternal role by sneaking out to hunt for food. Initially, he is more successful than his father, but he is soon thwarted by both Thomasin and the witch. It is Thomasin who finds Caleb naked in the rain upon his return from the woods but, unlike Thomasin's nude walk through the forest at the end of the film, the scene has no sexual overtones. When she cradles him, it is the embrace of a loved one, not the seductive but draining hold of the witch. In these scenes Thomasin becomes a pre-Oedipal mother: nurturing and untroubled (or at least, less troubled) by the Law of the Father. It is no coincidence that these scenes take place when the siblings are away from the rest of the family, surrounded by nature and/or natural images such as the woods, the river and the rain. Here, they are free to talk of apples, of windows made of glass, all luxuries they have been forced to give up in order to adhere to their father's aspirations. However, there are signs throughout the

film that maternal power has been corrupted: eggs break to reveal dead chicks, milk turns to blood, crops do not thrive.

Thomasin consistently proves herself more maternal than Katherine, despite the latter's insistence that Thomasin is the reason for the family's troubles. While Katherine becomes virtually catatonic after baby Samuel goes missing, Thomasin is able to offer comfort and care to Caleb while attempting to control the misbehaving twins. Katherine's maternal desires are used against her; her fear and anger towards Thomasin all revolves around a desire to protect her family. Once she considers Thomasin a threat she no longer sees her as her child, instead alienating, threatening and attacking her. The Devil approaches Katherine in the form of Caleb and Samuel to sign his book, but she becomes distracted by an attempt to breastfeed Samuel, who, it is later revealed, is in fact a raven that pecks at her breast. Katherine later accuses Thomasin of incest, shouting, 'You bewitched thy brother, proud slut! Did you not think I saw thy sluttish looks to him, bewitching his eye as any whore? [. . .] And thy father next. You took them from me. They are gone.' In Katherine's mind, Thomasin threatens Katherine's position as wife and mother, disappearing the younger children while lustfully stealing away Caleb and William. Katherine's deep-seated fear of being displaced by her daughter drives her to commit violent acts against her. William, on the other hand, symbolises both the Law of the Father and its impotency. William's beliefs and desires cause their move from England, and their banishment from the plantation. Despite his role as the head of the household and his symbolic role as the patriarchal leader, he can neither provide nor protect his family. The crops he grows rot in the ground, he returns from hunting empty-handed and while he speaks of future plans for the farm, he makes no effort to make them a reality. He does nothing to defend the family against the witch, yet refuses to return to the safety of the plantation until it is too late. He does love and care for his family – he is seen begging for their lives and eating dirt in contrition, for instance – but his selfishness and belief in the patriarchal rules he benefits by leave him vulnerable to the tumultuous emotions brought about through the witch's influence. An exasperated Thomasin confronts William about his flaws, questioning his masculinity:

Thomasin: You and mother planned to rid the farm of me. Aye. I heard you speak of it. Is that truth? You took of Mother's cup and let her rail at me. You confessed not till it was too late. Is that truth? [. . .] You are a hypocrite! [. . .] You took Caleb to the wood and let me take the blame of that too. Is that truth? You let Mother be as thy master. You cannot bring the crops to yield! You cannot hunt! Is that truth enough? [. . .] Thou canst do nothing save cut wood! [. . .] And you will not hear me!

As Thomasin points out, William's weakness can be seen clearly through his habit of cutting wood during times of stress, such as after verbal altercations, during the storm when Caleb is missing and after the latter's funeral. Unable to voice his emotions under the Law of the Father, he chops wood as a displacement activity, a repression that ultimately resurfaces in his rather ironic death. After Black Philip gores him, seemingly out of nowhere, William reaches for the axe to defend himself, yet ultimately casts it aside, allowing Black Philip to strike him again. The final attack kills William, pushing him into the pile of wood that he spent so long cultivating. Rather than adhering to the Law of the Father and masculine expectations that he should take up the axe and defend his family, he simply throws it away. William demands the benefits of a patriarchal system, yet is

unable to fulfil his gender-role obligations, figuratively throwing away his masculinity (in the phallic axe) as he is killed by the muscular, masculine Black Philip and his phallic horns.

With the literal and symbolic Father removed, the Devil is free to move into the position of all-powerful authority. William is in fact the only member of the family that is killed by the Devil rather than the witch or Thomasin; he must be destroyed for the Devil to take his place. The only authority remaining is the already unloving and ineffectual mother, who Thomasin kills in self-defence, all the while repeating that she loves her, fulfilling the Electra complex. Sarah Arnold notes that the Good Mother in horror films must be emotionally available and protective towards her children, things that Katherine are unable to do for Thomasin. Furthermore, Arnold writes that women in horror films are often forced to resort to violence in self-defence, noting that the 'This appropriation of "phallic" objects and masculine "agency" [...] validates phallic authority and the Law of the Father' (Arnold, 2013, p. 50). *The Witch* employs phallic objects in violent acts (the knife, the axe, the billhook, the goat's horn), but Thomasin herself only commits a violent act after William has died, in a last-ditch effort to sanction patriarchal power.

'I will guide thy hand'

There is no saviour for Thomasin, her younger siblings condemn her, her mother accepts the accusations without question based on her intent to rid the farm of her, whilst her father does not waver in his commitment to Puritan values. (Carroll, 2018, p.5)

Thomasin does not necessarily 'choose' the Devil and to become a witch: she is left with no other alternative. Cast out from Puritan society, vilified by her family, and ultimately left alone, Thomasin feels she can only turn towards that which has previously terrified her: witchcraft. This film does not offer a tale of a heroine who finally becomes free and is liberated from that which held her back. It may appear that way, yet by aligning herself with Satan and joining the other witches, Thomasin is now bound to the Devil. He has succeeded in tearing apart her world, and her beliefs in order to get her to join him. With promises of 'living deliciously' he not only took away her family and Puritan values, but also enticed her with promises of a better, more liberated life. However, becoming a witch does not provide freedom, it simply means that the patriarchal oppressor is the Devil, and that 'living deliciously' is to live crookedly, in the woods; to become a wild crone within the wilderness and to be feared by others. To do wicked things on behalf of a new master. Thomasin's 'choice' to become a witch means she is still ruled over and oppressed. Her religious upbringing conditions her to believe she is subservient and at the mercy of both wickedness and a patriarchal figure, a doctrine confirmed by the events of the film. Certainly, some of the Puritanical Christianity that the central family lives by proves to be true: there are devils, witches and other evil forces in the wild woods who will seduce, corrupt or steal away the innocent. According to these beliefs, Thomasin is predisposed to be damned no matter how devout she is; no act of piety can save her and so it is no wonder that her desperate prayers to God go unheard. At least the Devil answers back. Guilty before she is even born, Thomasin has no choice in her status or the additional sins she inherits from her gender. Why should she follow patriarchal and repressive rules only to be punished no matter what? Why not live a life of pleasure –

of ‘deliciousness’—when she is damned anyway? Whilst *The Witch* does not offer a seemingly happy ending and Thomasin’s union with witchcraft appears to be a restricted choice to become marginalised Other in the woods, it demonstrates the strong underpinning representation of being a woman and the difficulties women have faced, in that no matter what the choice, no matter which patriarchy is turned away from, females have historically been suppressed under male influence.

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