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The Witch Hunt Continues: Borrowed Images from
the Middle Ages in Dahl's *The Witches*

I'm thinking of a particular book. I'll give you some clues. It's number nine on the list of the most banned books of the 90s and it was declared by feminist authors to be dangerous and reinforcing culturally conditioned misogyny.

Yes, I'm talking about Roald Dahl's classic story, *The Witches*. This book went through many re-printings and was translated into many different languages. It was produced as a book on tape, a movie, a play, and even a board game. This story has been well loved since its first printing in 1983. However, it has also been often compared to this book the *Malleus Maleficarum*, published in 1486. That makes their publication dates almost exactly 500 years apart!

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (or, The Witch Hammer) was the widely used witch-hunting guide of European witch-hunt. It is well known for its misogynistic claims that perhaps influenced the witch-hunters, whose victims ended up being 80% female.

My argument is not that Roald Dahl meant to write a misogynist book, or that he read the *Malleus Maleficarum* and knew anything about the witch trials. He denied those claims in interviews. That is why the close resemblance of his book and the later movie adaptation to imagery of witches dating back to the Middle Ages is so noteworthy--it shows that these images were in his subconscious. We remember the witch hunts better

than we realize. My question is, why have these images survived completely intact through the centuries? What is their significance for modern women?

I'm going to start with a quick plot summary of Dahl's story *The Witches*, in case you didn't read it as many times as I did. A boy (Luke) who lives with his grandmother hears tales from her about real witches. Later, he is approached by a witch while he is in his tree house, but escapes because of his grandmother's warnings. When he and his grandmother go on vacation at a hotel, they happen upon a convention of witches! The witches turn Luke into a mouse. But he manages to slip the mouse potion into all of their soup, turning the whole convention of witches into mice! Luke then has plans to find all the other witches in the world and turn them into mice!

With that quick introduction to the book, I'm going to jump right into comparative analysis between *The Witches* and the *Malleus Maleficarum*, along with other texts contemporary to the *Malleus*.

In this first section I will look at general stereotypes of women and why they were considered more likely to be witches. One of the first warnings that Dahl gives the reader in his book is, "A witch is always a woman." (Dahl,9) He might be interested to know that that was not always the case. In fact, the word witch used to be gender neutral, simply referring to a person who practiced witchcraft and particularly malefica, or harmful spells. The *Malleus Maleficarum* in particular is pointed out as a possible cause of the gendering of the word witch. Here's a quote from the book about women in general: "What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours!" (Kramer, Question 6) The

Malleus Maleficarum also called women vindictive, slippery tongued, weak, credulous, superstitious, wheedling, secret and deceptive. The witches in Dahl's book could be called all of these adjectives—let's look at some examples.

At every word from the Grand High Witch, their leader, the witches all burst into thunderous applause. Their overexcitement and quick adoration of her leave them looking very credulous. They are also extremely vindictive. In their meeting, one witch speaks out of turn, and another witch instantly points her out, ready for the punishment. The witches' weakness can perhaps best be characterized in their farcical chase after Luke after they find him hiding in their conference. All one hundred of them can't catch one small boy as they run around the hotel grounds. The witches reach after Luke in vain (though, to be fair, later they corner him in his room). However, one small boy's ability to trick all one hundred witches shows their essential weakness—after all, in the end they all will die in mousetraps.

So, witches were shown to be weak women—but where does this weakness of character essentially come from? Here's a quote from King James' book, *Daemonologie*: “What can be the cause that there are twentie women given to that craft, where there is one man? **Epistemon**. The reason is easie, for as that sexe is frailer then man is... ..so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Devill, as was over well proved to be true, by the Serpents deceiving of Eva at the beginning.” (Stuart, Book 1) So all of this is perhaps stemming from Biblical imagery.

Indeed, the *Malleus Maleficarum* makes this reference many times. This is one quote from the *Malleus Maleficarum*, “For though the devil tempted Eve to sin, yet Eve seduced Adam. And as the sin of Eve would not have brought death to our soul and body

unless the sin had afterwards passed on to Adam, to which he was tempted by Eve, not by the devil, therefore she is more bitter than death.” (Kramer, Question 6) It goes on to speak of women in general as being bitterer than death, but this is the essential reasoning behind it.

The Witches also draws heavily upon Biblical imagery. The first time the boy is approached by a witch, he is in his tree house. As Anne-Marie Bird suggested in “Women Behaving Badly: Dahl’s Witches Meet Women of the Eighties,” this could be a tree of innocence—tree-houses are symbols of childhood, and Luke is innocently working up there when the witch appears. She is wearing all black, with horrifyingly purple eyes and bright red tempting lipstick. And what does she pull out her purse? A twisting snake. She calls up to Luke, “Come down out of that tree little boy, and I will give you the most exciting present you’ve ever had.” But Luke does better than Eve did—he scoots up into the branches and stays there until his grandmother comes to get him.

There is more snake imagery when we are introduced to the Grand High Witch. Luke twice mentions her eyes being like snakes, and in the movie her name is actually Eva.

But even more than her connection to the serpent is emphasized, in the movie it is clear that the witches are highly sexual. This is a large difference between Dahl’s book and the movie, released six years later in 1989. Illustrations of Dahl’s Grand High Witch show a cartoon-inspired woman, completely clothed in black. She is described as “tiny” and “pretty” with her mask on, and is horrifying with it off. However, her sexuality is never very emphasized.

In contrast, the Grand High Witch in the movie sweeps into the hotel with a plunging neckline and bright red lipstick. The scene in which Bruno is turned into a mouse features the Grand High Witch's obvious hip thrusting and panting as the boy begins to transform. Her pleasure looks very sexual in nature. Also, in many scenes in the movie the witches attract attention as the most alluring women in the room. Is this harkening back to the medieval accusation that witches were women who could not resist sleeping with devils?

This record from the Witch Walpurga's trial gives a picture of the witch hunt. "Him she enticed with lewd speeches and gestures and they convened that they should, on an appointed night, meet in her, Walpurga's, dwelling, there to indulge in lustful intercourse. So when Walpurga, in expectation of this, sat awaiting him at night in her chamber, meditating upon evil and fleshly thoughts, it was not the said bondsman who appeared unto her, but the Evil One in the latter's guise and raiment and indulged in fornication with her." (Judgement, 75-81) This was a theme running through the witch trials--witches supposedly gained their power from sex with demons. People were coerced, often using torture, to admit to having demon lovers.

An interesting fact is, throughout the witch hunts, while women were reviled, the imagery of the Virgin Mary was also very prevalent. In direct contrast to the witches, Luke's grandmother was such a warm and loving woman that she completely accepted her grandson, even as a mouse. As Dahl himself says directly after describing a witch, "Most women are lovely," (Dahl, 9) setting up a dichotomy of either evil witch women or the warm grandmother/schoolteacher character that he also describes. Women are never in between.

In *A Treatise on Witchcraft*, written by a witch hunter called Roberts, he says, “[Women] as when they be instructed and governed by good Angels, they prove exceeding religious, and extraordinarily devout; so consenting to the suggestions of evil spirits, become notoriously wicked, so that there is no mischief above that of a woman.” (Roberts, 42) *The Malleus* echoes these words. The virtue of women is polarized, so that women could only either be the eternal, maternal figure or the child-hating monster.

Nowhere were the witches’ evil acts more common than at the witches’ Sabbath. In the Middle Ages ideas of the witches’ Sabbath didn’t probably look like much like Dahl’s convention of witches. In fact, the book *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe* illustrates how a witch hunter would describe the Sabbath. “The witches, having made a pact with the devil, gathered periodically with other witches—sometimes numbering in the hundreds or even thousands—to perform a series of blasphemous, obscene and heinous rites. At these meetings the Devil would appear in various forms, together with subordinate demons. The witches would very often sacrifice children to the Devil, feast on the bodies of these infants and on other unsavory dishes, dance naked, and engage in sexual intercourse with the Devil and the other witches.” (Levack, 27) At the witches’ meeting in Dahl’s book they aren’t dancing naked, but they are ritually turning children into mice, and they have their own leader/Devil in the Grand High Witch. Compare the quote I just read with these quotes from Dahl’s book. “Once a year...the witches of each separate country hold their own secret meeting. They all get together in one place to receive a lecture from the Grand High Witch Of All The World...She is the ruler of all of them...She is all-powerful...” (Dahl, 38-39) The Grand High Witch is their Devil, leading the convention and all of the witches’ plots.

But while the devil first looks alluring, in the trials he is seen for who he is, usually after the accused witch has sex with him. His deformities give him away—a cloven foot or a wooden arm. Under her mask, the Grand High Witch is also monstrous. In the movie she is pictured as hideous with her gigantic nose, wrinkled skin, and huge claws. As Luke says in the book, “‘But Grandmamma,’ I said, ‘if nobody has ever seen the Grand High Witch, how can you be so sure she exists?’ My grandmother gave me a very long and severe look. ‘Nobody has ever seen the Devil,’ she said, ‘but we know he exists.’” (Dahl, 41)

The Devil may be loose in the hotel with Luke and his grandmother, but in the end they win the battle against evil. Both the lore of the Middle Ages and Dahl agree that witches don’t have ultimate power over God’s creations. Their domain is limited to tricks. For example, the *Malleus* says “...the devil can deceive the human fancy so that a man really seems to be an animal.” However, that is only fancy—underneath, the Devil cannot make a man into an animal. And the witches also cannot really make Luke into a mouse. He retained his ability to speak in his normal voice and to think. As his grandmother said, “They haven’t been able to change you into a one hundred per cent mouse...You are a human in mouse’s clothing.” (Dahl, 132) So the witches’ power is never stronger than the forces of good.

And either way the story ends, with Luke changing back into a boy (as in the movie) or staying a mouse (as in the book) he is satisfied and is ready to go out and conquer the rest of the witches. The Devil is foiled, and the children’s story is concluded happily ever after.

I chose this particular book because it is a book about women, not fairy-tale cackling green witches. Therefore, it is perfect for comparison with the witch trials. As Dahl said, “Real Witches dress in ordinary clothes and look very much like ordinary women. They live in ordinary houses and they work in ORDINARY JOBS.” (Dahl, 7) And the witch trials were a time when we found real, ordinary women and burned them at the stake.

These next questions I am posing to you. Does the fact that books like the *Malleus Malificarum* have survived, almost perfectly preserved, buried in ordinary children’s stories mean that these stereotypes are still relevant? Are we still looking for witches when we see a woman who is not a traditional maternal figure? Are we in our subconscious still blaming Eve for the end of the Garden of Eden? Are women still thought of as slippery-tongued and deceptive, more prone to secret spells? These are interesting questions to keep in mind when we look at the book *The Witches*, no matter what Roald Dahl’s intentions were when he wrote it. Thank you.

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