University of Lleida

The Witch Archetype and Gender Dynamics:
A Case Study of Alix E. Harrow's *The Once and Future Witches*

Berta Puig Preixens

May 25th, 2023

English Studies

Treball de Final de Grau

Supervisor: M. Isabel Santaularia Capdevila

Abstract

This research project delves into the representation of witches in popular narratives and literature, with a specific focus on the novel *The Once and Future Witches* by Alix E. Harrow. By exploring the interplay between witches, gender, and societal structures within the novel, this study aims to shed light on the complexities of this enduring archetype. Through a comprehensive examination of the historical origins of the figure of the witch and the contemporary trends in witch narratives, this research provides insights into the evolving portrayal of witches and their significance in examining societal constructs. The analysis encompasses the themes of witchcraft and worldbuilding, sisterhood, motherhood, age, race, queerness, and the portrayal of men and patriarchy. The key findings reveal a blend of perpetuated patriarchal standards, advances in intersectional feminist messages, and instances where the feminist agenda may have been pushed to regressive extremes. By contributing to the existing scholarship on gender representation in popular narratives and literature, this study highlights the ongoing relevance of feminist witch narratives in shaping societal discourse.

Keywords: witches, gender representation, popular narratives, intersectional feminism

Resum

Aquest projecte de recerca s'endinsa en la representació de les bruixes en narracions populars i en la literatura, específicament en com són representades en la novel·la *The Once and Future Witches* d'Alix E. Harrow. Mitjançant l'anàlisi de les interaccions entre les bruixes, el gènere i les estructures socials que es troben dins novel·la, aquest estudi pretén mostrar les complexitats d'aquest arquetip. A través d'un examen exhaustiu dels orígens històrics de la figura de la bruixa i les tendències en narracions contemporànies sobre bruixes, aquesta recerca proporciona una visió general de l'evolució de la representació de les bruixes i la seva rellevància a l'hora d'examinar construccions socials. L'anàlisi abasta els temes de la bruixeria i construcció del món fantàstic en la novel·la, la sororitat, la maternitat, l'edat, la raça, la diversitat sexual i la representació dels homes i del patriarcat. Els resultats principals revelen la presència d'una barreja d'instàncies en què es perpetuen estàndards patriarcals, progrés en missatges feministes interseccionals i instàncies on l'agenda feminista ha estat portada a extrems regressius. Amb aquesta contribució a l'estudi existent sobre la representació de gènere en narracions populars i literatura, aquest estudi posa de manifest la continuïtat de la rellevància de les narracions feministes de bruixes en la formació del discurs social.

Paraules clau: bruixes, representació de gènere, narracions populars, feminisme interseccional

Resumen

Este proyecto de investigación se adentra en la representación de las brujas en narrativas populares y en la literatura, específicamente en cómo son representadas en la novela *The Once and Future Witches* de Alix E. Harrow. Mediante el análisis de las interacciones entre las brujas, el género y las estructuras sociales presentes en la novela, este estudio pretende mostrar las complejidades de este arquetipo. A través de un examen exhaustivo de los orígenes históricos de la figura de la bruja y las tendencias en narrativas contemporáneas sobre brujas, esta investigación proporciona una visión general de la evolución de la representación de las brujas y su relevancia en el examen de construcciones sociales. El análisis abarca temas como la brujería y la construcción del mundo fantástico en la novela, la sororidad, la maternidad, la edad, la raza, la diversidad sexual y la representación de los hombres y del patriarcado. Los resultados principales revelan la presencia de una mezcla de instancias en las que se perpetúan estándares patriarcales, progreso en mensajes feministas interseccionales e instancias donde la agenda feminista ha sido llevada a extremos regresivos. Con esta contribución al estudio existente sobre la representación de género en narrativas populares y literatura, este estudio pone de manifiesto la continuidad de la relevancia de las narrativas feministas de brujas en la formación del discurso social.

Palabras clave: brujas, representación de género, narrativas populares, feminismo interseccional

Table of Contents

Introduction 5
Contextualisation and theoretical framework 6
Historical overview: the witch in history 7
Feminist appropriations of the witch 10
Postfeminism, popular culture, fantasy and witches 14
Analysis of *The Once and Future Witches* by Alix E. Harrow 17
Witchcraft and worldbuilding 18
Sisterhood 22
Motherhood, abortion and childbirth 25
Age 28
Race 29
Queerness 32
Men & patriarchy 33
Conclusion 35
References 37

Introduction

In the realm of popular narratives and literature, witches have long captivated the collective imagination, embodying a complex amalgamation of fear, fascination, and empowerment. Often depicted as enigmatic figures wielding supernatural abilities, witches have served as symbolic conduits for exploring various societal constructs, including gender, power dynamics, and the struggle against oppressive forces. More specifically, the figure of the witch has recently been appropriated by feminist writers in order to send progressive messages in the area of gender studies.

The present project delves into the multifaceted representation of witches, examining their portrayal in popular narratives and literature, and particularly focusing on analysing the 2020 novel *The Once and Future Witches* by Alix E. Harrow as a case study. I have chosen to analyse a set of topics which I consider to be the most significant in the novel from a feminist perspective: the portrayal of witchcraft and its relation to Harrow's worldbuilding, the treatment of sisterhood, motherhood, age, race and queerness, and the portrayal of men and patriarchy. Through this analysis, the present study aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between witches, gender, and societal structures as expressed by Alix E. Harrow.

This project is mainly divided into a background section and an analysis section. The background section lays the foundation for my exploration, delving into the origins of the witch archetype and its evolution throughout history. Central to this understanding is the examination of the myth of the "burning times" and its enduring impact on the portrayal of witches. By tracing the historical roots of the witch figure, we can gain insight into the socio-cultural contexts that have shaped their representation in contemporary narratives. Additionally, I explore the two major trends in the depiction of witches in contemporary media, considering the ways in which popular culture has both perpetuated and subverted traditional stereotypes.

While acknowledging the broader context, this study particularly focuses on the analysis of the intricate dynamics of witchcraft and gender in *The Once and Future Witches*. Alix E. Harrow's novel narrates the experiences of three sisters—Juniper, Agnes, and Bella—who navigate a world where witchcraft and women's rights are tightly intertwined. Through an exploration of the novel's themes and characters, I explore the nuanced representations of power, identity, and societal constructs that appear in the narrative.

By combining a comprehensive exploration of the historical and contemporary portrayals of witches with a focused analysis of *The Once and Future Witches*, this project aims at contributing to the existing scholarship on gender representation in popular narratives and literature. Through this

study, I seek to unravel the significance of witches as catalysts for social commentary, shedding light on the intersections of power, gender, and identity within the fictional realm.

Contextualisation and theoretical framework

Throughout history, witches have captivated the imaginations of people all over the world. From the broomstick-riding hags of mediaeval folklore to the modern-day depictions of powerful enchantresses in popular media, the witch has taken on many different forms over the centuries. The image of the witch has been used to represent everything from female empowerment to societal fears of the unknown and the unconventional. In the present, our idea of the witch is generally two-fold: one might either imagine a monstrous old hag with the vilest intentions, or a woman with a special spiritual connection to nature who brews potions and keeps a magical orchard—sometimes also young and working to fight evil. Some aspects of these two kinds of witches intersect, and yet we can all picture them as distinct figures despite both pertaining to our archetypal idea of the witch.

In the following sections, I will explore the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped the popular perception of witches, examining the ways in which they have been portrayed in literature, film, and other forms of media, how the figure of the witch has been appropriated by feminist discourse and to what extent such portrayals can be considered (post)feminist.

Sempruch (2008) divides the figure of the witch into three different kinds:

> 1) as a radical feminist (political) figure representing the culturally subjugated and victimized woman (...), and her subsequent herstorical reconfiguration into a sovereign, mythic, and powerful "superwoman" (...); 2) as a problematic dialogical figure collapsing into the archaic forms of the presymbolic mother and the phallic monstrous feminine (...); and 3) as a borderline phenomenon suspending logocentric discourse and opening thus heterogeneous spaces beyond the accumulation of stigmas, but also beyond the mythic origin, maternal jouissance, or femininity (...) (Sempruch, 2008, p. 5)

My research on the figure of the witch has focused mainly on Sempruch's first and second portrayals of the witch, as they are the kinds that are more commonly represented in popular culture; the last kind of witch described by Sempruch (2008), can be found, for instance, in the anime *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (Iwakami, 2011), where witches are represented as concepts (spaces, rather than individuals or monsters) originating from corrupted magical girls, and escape categorization into either the monstrous feminine or the radical feminist portrayals. However, it is a rare portrayal of the witch, of which I have not found more examples in popular culture.

Historical overview: the witch in history

When asked to picture a 'traditional' witch, one tends to imagine the fairy-tale version of the witch; the old one, the one with a hooked nose -probably with an ugly wart on it-, who lives in a mysterious hut in the middle of the forest, soars the skies while riding a broomstick and probably finds entertainment in being the wickedest in town—she might even eat children, too. You have seen her in popular fairy tales like "Snow White," "Hansel and Gretel", "The Little Mermaid", and "Rapunzel." She is the traditional witch, the wicked one, the fearsome one. She is the kind of witch nobody wants to be. Sempruch's (2008) second type of witch. Where did this archetype come from?

Creed, in her 1993 book *The Monstrous-Feminine*, explored the relationship between monstrous figures and gender in literature, mythology, and popular narratives, coining the term monstrous-feminine in the process. Her focus was set on horror films, an important part of contemporary popular culture, but our conception of popular horror characters, such as vampires, zombies, or witches, was not formed in a vacuum, and it rather comes from a long tradition of folktales, rumours, beliefs, and stories. Creed states that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (Creed, 1993, "Introduction" para. 2), and draws attention to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of how man fears woman because the sight of her genitals reminds him of the possibility of his own castration, and to Joseph Campbell's connection between woman and witch, since he stated that the long nose and fingers of the witch are phallic images that remind men not of the fear of castration but of the possibility—and fear—of a phallic woman.

It must be mentioned that, in her book, Creed only considers one of the faces of the witch, as she describes her as "invariably represented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts" (Creed, 1993, "Introduction", para. 3). As we shall see in the following sections, the witch is a very malleable character, which can be (and has been) presented in different lights. However, her discussion about this particular version of the witch remains relevant. She explains how "during the European witch trials of recent history she was accused of the most hideous crimes: cannibalism, murder, castration of male victims, and the advent of natural disasters such as storms, fires and the plague" (Creed, 1993, "Introduction", para. 3), and discusses the importance of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (or "hammer of the witches"), a 1484 book written by the Dominicans Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger which detailed how to identify, prosecute and extract confessions (through torture) from witches. The crimes that witches supposedly committed were, according to this book, related to midwifery and sexuality, including "copulating with the devil, causing male impotence, causing the penis to disappear and of stealing men's penises" (Creed, 1993, "The Woman as Witch:

Carrie", para. 3). Moreover, through the *Malleus Maleficarum*, we can ascertain the beliefs around why women were supposedly more prone to becoming witches: "The reasons all relate to the classic and phallocentric definition of woman as the 'other', the weaker but dangerous complement of man (…). The major reason given for woman's 'otherness' is her carnal nature. Women are less intelligent, less spiritual, more like children" (Creed, 1993, "The Woman as Witch: *Carrie"*, para. 4). Here, then, we find the indissoluble connection between the figure of the witch and gender, which still prevails today.

Creed (1993) also links the confessions of the individuals who were accused of witchcraft to the creation of the popular mythology related to witches and women's depravity, particularly in relation to their sexuality. She presents this connection as a result of the tortures that were inflicted upon the accused in order to force their confessions:

> No doubt women and men accused of witchcraft eventually confessed to all kinds of absurd and impossible 'crimes' in order to bring an end to their torture. In general, the accused were tortured until they confessed the names of other witches in the community. Burning on a funeral pyre was most likely a blessed relief from the horrors of the medieval torture chamber. The confessions of witches to absurd crimes, such as stealing men's penises and having intercourse with the devil, would have added further to popular mythology about the depraved and monstrous nature of woman's sexual appetites. (Creed, 1993, "The Woman as Witch: Carrie", para. 5)

However, while it is true that the confessions served as an important source to create the image of the witch described above, Purkiss, in her 2003 book *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, advocates for a different perspective: she argues that these confessions, which are usually overlooked by historians with the excuse that they were extracted under torture, actually contain women's vision on witchcraft and witches, and reflected their anxieties related to housekeeping and motherhood. She proposes, then, to look into the records of these confessions to extract contemporary views on witchcraft from a female perspective—to treat the women who were accused of witchcraft as people with agency who helped form the image of the witch, rather than taking them as helpless victims of the patriarchy (which, as we will see in the following section, was not entirely the case).

The witch has always been defined as the Other, part of the abject and of the marginalised sectors of society. Since the ruling minority is composed of white men, the tendency is to think of the witch as the white man's Other. However, and contrary to popular belief, Purkiss (2003) claims that the image of the witch as described in the witch trial confessions did not only set the witch against men, but rather against the ideal woman, too. One example of this would be the association of witches

with broomsticks, which highlights the domesticity of their influence and the threat that the witch poses as a woman who does not comply with societal norms, since she flies on a broomstick, rather than using it to clean the house. Moreover, and following this idea, witches also represented the anti-mother, as can be observed in the numerous confessions in which the witch bewitched, and often killed, children, or ate babies and infants.

Purkiss (2003) also explores how some women fashioned *themselves* as witches, too, in their confessions, which can be interpreted as them "shaping their own stories" (p. 145). Granted, confessions by women accused of witchcraft both shaped and were shaped by popular beliefs on witches. Nevertheless, as Purkiss states, "many folktales, even in late and uncomprehending versions, contain clear traces of women's fears of and fantasies about the witch and her powers" (2003, p. 278). Folktales were often created and spread by women, often as a way to pass on both moral and practical teachings to their children, which means that "folktales (...) speak to us in a female voice" (Purkiss, 2003, p. 278). It is important to acknowledge and value women as the creators and keepers of such stories, and therefore also of folk knowledge:

> The materials of folktale were kept in circulation by the shared concerns which they expressed and managed. The stories had meaning because they expressed common concerns: how to deal with those much more powerful than you, the cunning needed to live at the bottom of a hierarchical society, the constant desire for both food and money, and the inability to imagine them on the scale enjoyed by the rich, so that, for instance, abundance can only be signified by huge amounts of food.
>
> In all these cases, the agency of deponents and witches is visible as a process of rewriting cultural materials. Confession, too, was a process of rewriting. The early modern legal system was particularly reliant on the witch's confession. (Purkiss, 2003, pp. 165-166)

These stories—both folktales and confessions—are the ones that would shape the image of the witch as the wicked broom-riding hag that we all know. This would be established as the main archetype of the witch for centuries, with notable storytellers, authors and playwrights including this figure in their works.

Recent iterations of the witch also portray her as a monstrous being. As mentioned above, Creed's (1993) book focuses on horror films, an area where witches have an important and well-earned place. Her analysis of this character within this genre reaches the conclusion that the witch's "evil powers are seen as part of her 'feminine' nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms" (Creed, 1993, "The Woman as Witch: *Carrie"*, para. 7), and that a significant part of the monstrosity of the witch originates in her

reproductive functions (echoing, then, the anti-mother image that was delineated in the aforementioned confessions).

Feminist appropriations of the witch

In recent years, popular culture has observed the rise of a new trend in the representation of the witch. While the monstrous, wicked hag has not disappeared from popular media, a new kind of witch, still inevitably and deeply connected to femininity, has appeared. Purkiss (2003) describes as a woman who has an extensive knowledge about healing herbs and a special connection to nature, is sexually liberated, works as a healer and midwife to help those in need and was taught by her mother (or other female relative). This woman who only wishes to help, however, actually poses a threat to the powerful elites, who wish to keep women chaste and controlled (the Church), to benefit from medical knowledge and artificial medicines instead of having female healers who work with plants (doctors), and who fear independent and free women (men as a whole). As a result, "the Inquisition descended on her, and cruelly tortured her into confessing to lies about the devil. She was burned alive by men who hated women, along with millions of others just like her" (p. 7). This is Sempruch's (2008) first kind of witch, the radical feminist one; Purkiss calls her the 'herbalist-witch,' a term I will be borrowing here, and she is the precursor of the current 'good witch' that we have seen in recent popular media, for example TV series like *Bewitched* (Ackerman, 1964-1972), *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (Hart, 1996-2003), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon et al., 1997-2003), or *Charmed* (Burge et al., 1998-2006).

The origins of the herbalist-witch are a result of a series of historical myths created around the 1920s by some anthropologists, the most notable of them being Margaret Murray, which were adopted fifty years afterwards by pagans (especially wiccans) and feminists (Gaskill, 2008). Murray affirmed the existence of what she called the "Old Religion", a nature-based, matriarchal religion which had originated in prehistorical times and which had survived throughout history, including the "burning times", thanks to it being kept alive clandestinely by its practitioners. These claims inspired the witchcraft revival that took place in the 80s, with its most prominent figure being Gerald Gardner and his neo-pagan religion Wicca, which supposedly follows the tradition of the Old Religion. Purkiss (2003) comments on this witchcraft revival, although mistakenly calling its practitioners "modern witches," when she in fact is referring to Wiccans particularly: "The modern witch's history of herself is thus a lapsarian narrative. Indeed, there is not one Fall, but many" (p. 42). She lists several historical and mythological events as examples, such as the loss of Atlantis, the so-called "burning times", or the process of industrialization. "Such lapses or losses are followed by attempts at recovery (…) in

which witches are portrayed as struggling to regain what has been lost. This defines modern witches as both restorers and inventors of a lost tradition" (p. 42), which actually closely resembles nationalist and conservative political rhetoric in that it idealises the recovery of a lost, but more desirable, past. In other words, such a myth is attractive to neopagans because it attributes them an important role as keepers of tradition, despite it containing conservative undertones.

As mentioned above, however, this myth was not only appropriated by Wiccans and neopagans, but also by feminists, with whom a similar pattern can be found. In recent years, the figure of the herbalist-witch has been used in feminist narratives to sell a very specific version of history - and it has been quite successful in its enterprise. Purkiss (2003) sustains that "it is still being retold, in full or in part, by women who are academics, (...) by poets, novelists, popular historians, theologians, dramatists" (p. 7), and most of us have, at some point, heard the story of the wise woman who was burnt at the stake by the evil men of the Church. It remains, however, a fictional story - a myth. It is true that thousands of women were accused of witchcraft (sometimes using torture to force them to confess) and executed as a result, despite being innocent by our current standards, and it is also true that gender played an important role in the accusations (while men were accused too, there is a clear bias against women). However, it is also true that herbal remedies and folk magic were commonly used by women without causing any problems in their community, no evidence points towards the accused being mainly healers nor midwives, nor were their sexual habits particularly taken into account (they were not necessarily unmarried, lesbian, nor sexually promiscuous), the accusations were made equally by men and women, the civil courts were actually harsher than the Inquisition, and torture was not used in some countries - in some places the witches were not even burnt, but hung instead, like in England (Purkiss, 2003).

How come, then, that such a myth was created, and how did it become so popular? Sempruch (2008) calls this phenomenon *herstory*, "a form of feminist mythology constituted in relation to and as an alternative to the established male-centred narrative" (pp. 53-54), and Purkiss (2003) provides the explanation that "the myth has become important, not because of its historical truth, but because of its mythic significance" (p.8). In other words, the feminists that participated in the creation and dissemination of the myth did so because of its significance as a story that offered an alternative to male-centred history. Purkiss (2003) sustains that the reason why it is significant is that it allows the readers to distinguish the roles of the characters very easily. The myth outlines a story with a clear opposition between men —the oppressors, the bad ones— and women —the victims, the good ones. It sets out to establish an ahistorical time in which women's lives were perfect, and then showcases

how patriarchy stunts that perfection and establishes the oppression that we all know today. Moreover,

> It is often linked with (...) the myth of an originary matriarchy, through the themes of mother-daughter learning and of matriarchal religions as sources of witchcraft. This witch-story explains the origins and nature of good and evil. It is a religious myth, and the religion it defines is radical feminism. (Purkiss, 2003, p. 8)

The reason why this myth garnered so much popularity, according to Purkiss (2003), with which Sempruch (2008) later agreed, is because feminism lacked a specific historical event through which to explain, or exemplify, the oppression of women. Through the creation of the myth of the "burning times", then, feminism is provided with a story that takes a similar role in women's history as the Holocaust does for the Jews. Feminists appropriate the witch with the ultimate purpose to have a common history, and a set of symbols upon which to identify themselves, and, at the same time, base their vindications in the present:

> The figure of the witch mirrors—albeit sometimes in distorted form—the many images and self-images of feminism itself. Originally, women's history was inspired by the wish to uncover the truth about women, and this led to a yearning to find oneself in the past, to locate real women who share our natures and problems. The witch offers opportunities for both identification and elaborate fantasy (...). (Purkiss, 2003, p. 10)

Through her critical analysis of the myth, Purkiss (2003) suggests that it is no longer useful and even harmful to the feminist movement. Sempruch (2008) claims so overtly, stating that it "has lost its political usefulness" (p. 23). However, she also admits that the creation of the myth was logically unavoidable at one time, due to feminism's need to find a common identity and, as mentioned above, a historical event to unify women.

Certainly, women have been, and still are, called witches as a derogatory term. Women who escape social standards —old, single, eccentric, having strong personalities— are *still* called witches. Today, the witch is still intrinsically tied to womanhood, and it is still considered a negative attribute. Thus, appropriating the figure of the witch and transforming it into something positive (an empowered woman, a guiltless victim) was necessary at one point in history, but it still makes sense to do so in the present as an act of subversion of stereotypes, of reclaiming an insult that is exclusively aimed at women. As a result, many works of fiction have been created based on this myth, many of which, as Sempruch (2008) observes, actually tend to be placed in a liminal space between fiction and auto/biography.

However, such appropriation of the figure is not without its dangers, as the manipulation of history (or *herstory*) within the myth, regardless of it being born from a desire to challenge the established rules of academic historians (Purkiss, 2003), is highly questionable and contains contradictory and even conservative ideologies that one must be aware of. The 'history' of the witch is usually problematically identified with women's history as a whole (Purkiss, 2003), which, by turning the witch into a symbol that stands for the "physically abused and culturally neglected "woman"" (Sempruch, 2008, p. 13), attempts to unify women from drastically different backgrounds and circumstances into a single struggle (Sempruch, 2008), therefore resulting in a gross generalisation that invisibilises several minorities.

The myth is constructed "not as a reconstruction of the past, but [as] an account of the way things *always* are" (Purkiss, 2003, p. 11). It is a narrative that serves to send a very specific message to the reader, consisting of both a complaint and a fantasy, simultaneously. This, then, generates the conflict of considering women both empowered wise women *and* perpetual victims of patriarchy at once. On the one hand, the herbalist-witch embodies a fantasy in which domestic and traditionally feminine skills are valued and seen as useful by the community at large, while, on the other hand, women are depicted as eternal helpless victims whose bodies are tortured and humiliated, and ultimately murdered (Purkiss, 2003). As a result, while the myth is used with the aim of sending a feminist message, the ultimate idea that is conveyed is that women will *always* be *potentially* powerful individuals mistreated by the patriarchal society they inhabit—their pain and suffering is romanticised and no real strive for change is exhibited.

The myth of the "burning times", then, presents a static image, rather than a true desire for action. Purkiss (2003) attributes this trait to the fact that it is a fantasy that depends on the contrast that opposes the modern urban world —which is usually associated with logic, rationality and maleness— to a countryside from a distant, unspecified past —which is associated with nature, intuition, and femaleness. Since the power that resides in women is tied to the past, there are no expressions of action for a better future in narratives that rely on the myth. Instead, it actually contains elements of a conservative, and almost retrograde nature, which "reflect uncritically patriarchal notions of appropriate feminine behaviour" (Purkiss, 2003, p. 21). The herbalist-witch takes on roles that are associated with traditionally feminine activities: she is a nurturing figure who takes care of other women and nurses children, and she has an inclination towards healing others and taking care of the domestic space. Her knowledge as a herbalist is still linked to her femininity, with it being used for these purposes and being passed down matrilineally —or, on some occasions, it is even innate (Purkiss, 2003).

All in all, the myth of the "burning times" results in an attempt at rewriting history (*herstory*) using seemingly feminist elements that actually covertly convey conservative ideologies. Purkiss (2003) summarises it in the following way:

> The myth of a lost matriarchy is disabling rather than enabling for women. To relegate female power in politics or religion to a lost past, to associate it with the absence of civilisation, technology and modernity, is to write women out of the picture. To confine female power to the marginal space of a reinvented religion which rejects any vestige of mainstream power is to reify women's exclusion from the public sphere. (pp. 43)

The witch, then, is a character which originally belonged to the horror genre due to her being a "mixture of familiarity and unbearable strangeness" (Purkiss, 2003, p. 283) that forced us to face our darkest feelings (as seen through, for example, how women who were accused of witchcraft would fashion the witch as their Other), and which has recently been increasingly sanitised—probably as a way to ignore precisely those feelings, and to make her into something we would want to be, rather than something we fear: "[n]ow she is clean, pretty, a herbalist with a promising career in midwifery, a feminist, as good a mother as anybody if not rather better than most, sexually liberated (without anything too kinky)" (Purkiss, 2003, p. 283).

Postfeminism, popular culture, fantasy and witches

The reasons why the figure of the witch has been appropriated to vindicate women's power (to different degrees of success) have, then, been established thus far. The present section will explore the relationship between popular narratives about witches and feminism at large.

According to some academics, we currently live in a postfeminist society. Negra and Tasker (2007) define postfeminism as a term that "broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the "pastness" of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated" (p. 1). In other words, the feminist advancements that have been taking place since the 1970s and 80s are currently widely overlooked in popular culture under the assumption that feminism is no longer necessary precisely because those advancements took place (McRobbie, 2004). As a result, we are seeing a surge in seemingly feminist media that actually contains conservative and even retrograde ideologies:

> The limits of the kind of gender equality enacted within contemporary popular media culture are profound: they are marked by the valorization of female achievement within traditionally male working environments and the celebration of surgical and other disciplinary techniques that

> "enable" (i.e., require) women to maintain a youthful appearance and attitude later in life. (Negra & Tasker, 2007, p. 1-2)

In fact, the mass media prevents the full advancement of feminism, a phenomenon that Susan Faludi coined as "backlash" in her seminal work. Backlash defines a set of social mechanisms whereby feminist advancements are thwarted or 'pushed back' (Faludi, 2006), and which presents itself in different ways. For instance, one might observe what Douglas (2010) called "enlightened sexism", which is a pattern or attitude we find in popular media in which feminism is treated as such an obsolete movement that sexism is presented as a joke because the audience should already know it is sexist, and that it is thus not used seriously. In doing so, these media participate in precisely that sexism they claim to be mocking—thus, progress is always accompanied by retrograde messages and forces that make sure that the status quo remains unaffected.

Taking this into account, the analysis of the witch in postfeminist popular media is of particular interest to gauge the treatment of women, due to the character's connection to gender. While the witch is being increasingly used as a symbol of female power, it does not always successfully advance a feminist agenda. In fact, it is mostly used as a monster, associated with evil. In addition, even when she is presented positively, there are certain limits that popular narratives very rarely cross. The analysis of the characteristics of the witch in popular culture, then, allows us to assess the extent to which ours is an actually postfeminist society.

To begin with, the witch is almost always white. This is a trait that makes sense to some extent due to the European-centric nature of the history of the witch. Moreover, merging European magical traditions with those of other cultures is dangerous if not enough research is conducted. However, there are a few instances of witches of colour in recent popular media, namely Rochelle in *The Craft* (Fleming, 1996), played by Rachel True; Rosalinda and Prudence in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Krieger et al., 2018-2020), played by Jasmine Sinclair and Tati Gabrielle, respectively; or Marie Laveau in *American Horror Story: Coven* (Murphy & Falchuk, 2013-2014), played by Angela Bassett. It is important to note here that all of these actresses are of African-American descent, and none of these witches is the protagonist of the film or series they appear in.

The topic of class is also one rarely dealt with in witch-based popular media. While those who were accused of witchcraft in the modern era were overwhelmingly lower class, the witches of today are usually middle-class witches, with some of them being upper-class. Teenage witches often live a comfortable life (e.g., in *The Craft* (Fleming, 1996) or *Charmed* (Burge et al., 1998-2006)), or are part of a bigger family or coven of witches who are usually notably wealthy (e.g., in *American Horror Story: Coven* (Murphy & Falchuk, 2013-2014) or in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Krieger et

al., 2018-2020)). The protagonist of *The Love Witch* (Biller, 2016), for instance, owns a convertible car and purchases a big, Victorian house at the beginning of the film.

The age of the witch usually depends on her role. Evil witches are usually old and ugly, whereas good witches are always young and beautiful. On the rare occasions when an evil witch is young and beautiful, she will probably use her beauty to seduce a man, and/or she will be punished with her "true" age in the end (see Mother Gothel in Disney's *Tangled* (Greno & Byron, 2010) or Melisandre in *Game of Thrones* (Benioff et al., 2011-2019)). Old age is inherently viewed and treated as negative in popular media, and witch stories are no exception to this rule: old people are underrepresented in popular media and old women are doubly marginalised by their age and gender, and therefore even more severely invisibilised (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012). Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) conducted a thematic analysis of the different stereotypes of old women in the media, and found three recurring kinds "the controlling mother; the plain, uneducated, but good housewife; and the bitch-witch older woman" (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012, p. 170). They describe the latter in the following way:

> This character can be found mainly in children- and family-oriented film and television series (…). These women possess supernatural, evil powers and are often presented as hypersexual and, thus, a threat to society. They are envious of younger, more beautiful women=girls, and they are heartless, vindictive, egocentric, and seemingly unremorseful when destroying others' lives to fulfill their personal, irrational desires. Based on the historical roots of ''witch hunts'' in Europe and the U.S., these stereotypes are also evident in fairy tales (e.g., Hansel and Gretel). (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012, p. 171)

The sexuality of the witch is, therefore, presented as a threat, which seems to be a vestige of the stories of copulation with the devil that were spread during the witch trials. Female sexuality has always been demonised, and the witch is the perfect figure through which to do this. As stated above, evil beautiful witches are oftentimes also seductresses, using their sexual appeal to attract and probably bewitch or harm men. Interestingly, though, despite the demonisation of the witch's sexuality, hardly ever do we see queer witches in popular media. Walker (2021) claims that the witch "can be argued as beyond gender, and beyond human, by representing the figure of the ultimate queer Other" (p. 145) due to the liminality of the character and gender-defying attitudes. Regardless, the truth remains that queer witches are scarce in contemporary media. One of the dominant traits of the witch is, then, that she remains attainable for men.

The figure of the witch has always been, and still is, a fantasy. And fantasies are reflections of the dominant ideologies and thoughts of an era. The current representation of the witch serves as

an indicator for society's views on powerful women: power is associated with either evil (and evil is, in turn, associated with ugliness and old age), or with remaining attractive to a male audience. Witches are white, middle-class, young, and heterosexual. Only in case they are evil are they ever ugly or old, and sometimes their real age is only revealed moments before their death.

The question that remains to be answered then is: to what extent is the feminist representation of the witch feminist? The sanitization of the witch has resulted in making her palatable for everyone, therefore removing the liminality and subversiveness that the figure once had. Rountree (1997) reflects on this in the following way:

> Feminist witches walk a fine line. The historical witch was a hideous image of womanhood invented by misogynists of quite breathtaking cruelty in order to label, damn and burn women. The point of contemporary women publicly adopting the name "witch" is (...) to re-invent the witch. If, however, women claim publicly to be "witches" but fail to re-invent the witch for the dominant culture, they may turn out to be unwitting participants in a potentially sadomasochistic perpetuation of the most misogynistic fantasy the world has known. (p. 226)

In other words, regardless of how postfeminist our image of the witch may seem, it is still based upon patriarchal ideas, and subject to the backlash that Faludi (2006) speaks of. Failing to correctly assess which parts of the construction of the witch are of patriarchal nature, and failing to change them, results in a perpetuation of precisely the same stereotypes that feminist authors attempt to resist.

Analysis of *The Once and Future Witches* by Alix E. Harrow

The object of analysis of the present study is the novel *The Once and Future Witches* by Alix E. Harrow, published in 2020. The book is set in 1893 in a fictional American town called New Salem, which exists in a fictional world where witchcraft and magic exist, and where witches used to be powerful and free until a series of purges and witch trials and burnings took place and relegated witches to the margins, almost making them disappear in the process: "Witching isn't all gone, of course. (…) It's just a lot better-behaved than it used to be" (Harrow, 2020, p. vii).

The protagonists of the story are three sisters, James Juniper, Agnes Amaranth and Beatrice Belladonna Eastwood, whose circumstances lead them to fight against patriarchal oppression and bring about the start of a new age of witchery. The sisters become involved in the suffragist movement and discover secrets about both their family history and the history of witchcraft as they fight against

the evil Gideon Hill, who seeks to completely eradicate witches. The novel blends historical fiction and fantasy, and explores many themes, such as sisterhood, motherhood, patriarchal oppression, queer identities, and racial issues, all of which amount to an intersectional feminist[1] narrative.

However, the novel is not without its flaws, since it contains messages that do not fully advance a feminist agenda. The present section sets out to analyse the book from a postfeminist perspective to determine to what extent it advances or hinders feminist ideologies. In particular, I will focus on the topics of worldbuilding (how the novel portrays the history of the world it is set in, and how witchcraft works within it), sisterhood, motherhood, age, race, queer identities, and the portrayal of men as arenas where the feminist discourse can be tested.

Witchcraft and worldbuilding

The Once and Future Witches mixes historical fiction and fantasy, and covers not only the 1890s, but past events too. The main narrative of the world that is presented in the novel is that of an ideal age of witches, who "were wild as crows and fearless as foxes, because magic blazed bright and the night was theirs" (Harrow, 2020, p. vii), which was brought to an end through a series of purges. The blame for these purges is attributed to men and the Church. Throughout the novel we find many examples of Christian virtues and sins being used to blame women and justify the witch hunt by the witch prosecutors. For instance, it is made explicit that, when burnt at the stake, "witches always went to God with their tongues free to repent and their hands free to pray" (Harrow, 2020, p. 463). In fact, in the very introduction of the book we are already told about the role that the Church plays in the witch hunt as a patriarchal institution:

> The preacher back home says it was God's will that purged the witches from the world. He says women are sinful by nature and that magic in their hands turns naturally to rot and ruin, like the first witch Eve who poisoned the Garden and doomed mankind, like her daughters' daughters who poisoned the world with the plague. He says the purges purified the earth and shepherded us into the modern era of Gatling guns and steamboats (…). (Harrow, 2020, p. viii)

In particular, the man who epitomises the ills of the Church is the main antagonist of the book, Gideon Hill, an evil male witch who discovered the secret of immortality by reincarnating his soul through different bodies. In this way, he was also who originated the novel's version of the myth of

[1] Intersectional feminism is the branch of feminist theory that takes into account the intersection of different forms of oppression, such as "age, class, dis/abilities, ethnicity, nationality, racialization, sexuality" and "violence" (Lykke, 2010, p. xi), among others.

Saint George, the saint/hero who rid the world of the evil witches. However, Mama Mags, the late grandmother of the three protagonists of the novel, told them the story as it really happened: Saint George tried to eliminate the power of witches but the Last Three (the last three witches that united to stand against him; representing the archetypes of the maiden, mother, and crone) flew to Avalon (the library that the Last Three had built to preserve the knowledge of witchcraft) "in a desperate attempt to save the last remnants of their power from the purge" (Harrow, 2020, p. 44). Indeed, the protagonists later discover that the Last Three had built a library to preserve the knowledge of witchcraft, since the purges had begun not as witch burnings, but as book burnings —precisely to make that knowledge disappear—, and had been the work of Saint George and his followers. Witch burnings are presented as a result of the realisation that the knowledge of witchcraft was not only kept in books but also in the minds of the witches themselves "who carry the words and ways in their skulls" and can "surely teach them to their daughters and sisters" (Harrow, 2020, p. 408).

Moreover, in this way, Harrow highlights the importance of folk tales and songs. The novel presents them as the vehicle through which the knowledge of witchery was passed down from mothers to daughters, therefore portraying folk knowledge as a female tradition, and women's voices as silenced, ignored and deemed irrelevant: "What words and ways were preserved were slipped into songs and rhymes, folded into fables. Women sang them to their children and taught them to their sisters, and even the watchful neighbors and listening shadows thought nothing of it" (Harrow, 2020, p. 406). Another example of the undervaluation of female voices in the world presented in the novel is the existence of mother's-names, "old-fashioned second-names given by mothers to daughters" (Harrow, 2020, p. 45), which are seen as unimportant or even "blasphemous" (Harrow, 2020, p. 45) in the times of the protagonists.

The historical past of the world of *The Once and Future Witches* is, then, none other than what Purkiss (2003) claims to be the myth of the "burning times": the story of a distant past in which women were free and powerful until men called them witches and burnt them at the stake, resulting in the oppression that we are living in the present time. Moreover, Purkiss (2003) also highlights the importance of female knowledge and voices, in line with the message that is conveyed in the novel through the importance of folk knowledge transmitted from mothers to daughters. Purkiss (2003) states that "women are characteristically the bearers of this kind of knowledge, the repositories of what has been lost, and the site of its shattering, uncanny return" (p. 154), which is why women storytellers tend to attach this kind of knowledge to witches—in the exact same way that Harrow does in the novel.

The myth of the “burning times” explained so far, as mentioned above, is set in a vague, distant past in the world of the novel. The events that the protagonists go through, however, are localised in a more concrete time and space. The protagonists live in a city called New Salem, known as ‘the city without sin’ and built after the burning of Old Salem—which would be the equivalent of the real-world Salem, in Massachusetts, famously known for the witch trials that took place in it —, described in the novel as the place “[w]here men feared to tread and women feared nothing at all” until “the honorable Judge Geoffrey Hawthorn arrived with his troop of Inquisitors” (Harrow, 2020, p. 155).

This is not the only reference to real places where witch trials took place. In the book, these were the places where the Lost Way of Avalon was called back into a physical place. Harrow mentions not only Old Salem, but also “Wiesensteig in the fifteen-sixties, before that, and the Auld Kirk Green at the end of the century”, as well as “Navarre in the early sixteen-hundreds” (Harrow, 2020, p. 411). Moreover, the protagonists also discover the library of Avalon not to be the first one with knowledge on witchery to be burned, since other libraries were doomed to the same fate, such as “Alexandria, Antioch” or “Avicenna” (Harrow, 2020, p. 415). This is yet another one of the traits listed by Purkiss (2003) as pertaining to the myth of the “burning times”: the fact that it is a lapsarian myth with many falls. In fact, the novel goes as far as making the first to blame for these falls be Eve, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, as she is called “the first witch” (Harrow, 2020, p. viii).

The novel’s historical fiction in relation to the history of witches takes an even more concrete form in the scenes relating to witch trials. Juniper is tortured in a way that resembles the tortures that the accused of witchcraft were subjected to in the Modern Period, being burned and questioned in hopes of obtaining a confession. The questions she is asked are, in fact, a loyal echo of the ones witches were asked about their activities: “They asked her questions—who were her co-conspirators? Where did they meet? When had she last lain with the Devil?” (Harrow, 2020, p. 226).

Even more evidently, the three protagonists of the novel are also subjected to an actual witch trial, in the same way that they were done during the ‘purges’, because “history digs a shallow grave, and that the past is always waiting to rise again” (Hallow, 2020, p. 444). The book goes through the different phases the trial consisted of: “The convening of the court” (p. 444), “the evidence against them” (p. 445), and “the confession” (p. 446), during which torture is used.

The book, however, also contains historical references of questionable origin, which echo the oppression suffered not by women or individuals accused of witchcraft, but other oppressed minorities: we are told about how witches were placed in iron bridles, shackles and collars, which is

more reminiscent of the treatment of slaves; we are told about how the new ordinances set in place by Gideon Hill when he becomes the mayor "specifically revoke the parental rights of known witches or witch-sympathizers" (Harrow, 2020, p. 382), which is rather reminiscent of the treatment of the Australian aborigines with the 1915 amendments to the Aborigines Protection Act;[2] and there is also a scene in which the three sisters are moving from one place to another as they are trying to escape Gideon Hill, during which a character named Mr. Blackwell helps them, and had a secret room prepared for them which is accessed through a hidden library—which is eerily reminiscent of real-life Anne Frank's situation. All of these questionable historical facts, in my view, agree with what Purkiss (2003) writes about in the chapter "A Holocaust of One's Own": the need for feminist authors of witch stories to present the "burning times" as something akin to the Jewish Holocaust, because it is a story which makes a clear distinction between the victims (in this case women) and the perpetrators (the patriarchy, or sometimes —mistakenly— men).

Clearly, the book's narrative has been set up to send a very specific message, in a similar way to what Sempruch (2008) mentions about feminist witch stories containing more theory or autobiographical traits than fictional ones. In doing so, the novel becomes a prime example of a *herstorical* text, since it is a rewriting of history from a female perspective, in which women are at the same time both empowered and lacking freedom. Certainly, it is quite apparent that the aim of the story is to equate witchcraft to women's rights, and to therefore tell the story of how women lost their rights and then fought (or are fighting) to regain them, therefore aiming to send a very clear feminist message. In several instances in the novel we can observe a this comparison, such as when "[w]itching and women's rights" are said to be "the same thing, more or less", since they are both "a kind of power", the kind women "aren't allowed to have" (Harrow, 2020, p. 47). Similarly, the declaration of intent of the clandestine witch organisation that the protagonists create, the Sisters of Avalon, is not to restore witchcraft but "to restore the rights and powers of womankind" (Harrow, 2020, p. 134), and we are told that "witchcraft isn't one thing but many things, all the ways and words women have found to wreak their wills on the world" (Harrow, 2020, p. 353) and that "every woman who says what she shouldn't or wants what she can't have, who fights for her fair share" (Harrow, 2020, p. 467) is a witch. Even at the end of the book, when the three sisters have begun a new age of witchcraft (which would signify a significant advancement in the field of women's rights), Juniper states that "the backlash will come one day, the way it always does. I know the world won't change easy, that more women will burn before it does, but at least I got to see the beginning" (Harrow, 2020, p. 513),

[2] The 1915 amendment to the Aborigines Protection Act passed by the New South Wales Government ruled that "any Aboriginal child might be removed without parental consent if the Board considered it to be in the interest of the child's moral or physical welfare" (Read, 2006, p. 8).

which is particularly interesting since the word ‘backlash’ specifically is used, echoing Faludi’s (2006) theory which states that every achievement by women is counterbalanced by an attempt to hinder or prevent women’s advancement.

The Once and Future Witches, however, introduces a contradiction to this metaphor through its worldbuilding, when it comes to the difference between witchcraft, which is presented (as mentioned above) as inherently female, and what is known as ‘men’s magic’. Throughout most of the book, the magical system presented to us is divided by gender and following traditional gender roles. For instance, we are told that magic to tie shoelaces together “sounds like men’s magic” (Harrow, 2020, p. 135), or that “every mama teaches her daughters a few little charms to keep the soup-pot from boiling over or make the peonies bloom out of season” while “[e]very daddy teaches his sons how to spell ax-handles against breaking and rooftops against leaking” (Harrow, 2020, p. vii). Granted, Harrow attempts to subvert and dispel these gender roles by making women able to work men’s magic, such as when Agnes shows August that she is able to do so; and making men able to work witchcraft, such as Mr. Blackwell, who was taught by his great-aunt; or the villain of the story himself, who works witchcraft instead of men’s magic. Magic is, then, genderless: “You think magic cares what’s between your legs? Or how you do your hair?” (Harrow, 2020, p. 406). However, any attempts to subvert these gender roles are quite futile when taking into account the continued and almost overwhelming insistence on associating women with witchcraft and nature, and negative comments towards male witches, such as “a man working witchcraft, an uncanny sickness” (Harrow, 2020, p. 353), which is made when Mr. Blackwell shows his knowledge on witchery. In other words, we can observe how the author aimed at both subverting the image of the witch and empowering women by equating witchcraft to women’s rights, while also sending a message of equality by making magic genderless. The result, however, turns out to be a confusing contradiction, mainly caused by Harrow constantly insisting on the denigration of men (rather than patriarchy), as we shall see in the section on the portrayal of men.

Sisterhood

The protagonists of *The Once and Future Witches* are three sisters who reunite after having been estranged as a result of the actions of their abusive father and a series of misunderstandings. Once reconciled, the sisters must work together to accomplish their goals and, therefore, the theme of sisterhood is a central one in the novel.

Each of the three sisters represents one of the three female archetypes of the maiden, the mother, and the crone, as is made explicit several times in the novel. However, the origin of these

three female archetypes upon which the three main characters are built, is questionable from a feminist standpoint, since it was "the witchcraft revival, largely formulated by men" that "invented a fertility religion which depended on the notion of a Great Goddess who represented the biological stages of women's lives (maiden, mother, crone) as prehistorical, uncivilised" (Purkiss, 2003, p. 37). In other words, the use of these three archetypes reinforces the association between femaleness and nature and intuition, distancing women from rationalism, civilisation and progress. This is an instance of retreatism, which is in turn reinforced by the protagonists' (especially Juniper's) nostalgia for the countryside they grew up in, and the implications throughout the novel of nature being the ideal place to live and a place they would like to go back to.

Granted, Harrow attempts to subvert these archetypes, focusing, for instance, on the strength that motherhood requires rather than nurturance. However, it is also done in questionable ways, especially in the case of the crone, as we shall see in one of the following sections, in which I will deal with ageism. Juniper, the maiden, is the one who advances the action the most, since Harrow subverts the archetype of the sweet, soft maiden and turns her into "the fierce one, the feral one, the witch who lives free in the wild woods" or "the little girl in the red cloak who doesn't run from the wolf" (Harrow, 2020, p. 400).

Juniper is, out of the three sisters, the one who wants to fight the most, the one who unites, convinces, and urges the others to reach their goals. She is also the one who breaks gender roles the most, since she is the most easily irate sister, who has actually murdered someone in the past—none other than their abusive father, in fact. She has no romantic interests, either, and she is at one point even compared to a man, therefore granting her a somewhat masculine quality: "Juniper rises from the bed, reaching for her red-cedar staff the way a man might reach for a loaded pistol" (Harrow, 2020, p. 172).

It is also Juniper, the revolutionary one, who wants to join the suffragist movement, and who attempts to convince her sisters to do so, too. However, the novel introduces the element of class (and, as we will see in the following sections, of race, too) when Juniper realises that the background and aspirations of the New Salem Women's Association (NSWA), the suffragist organisation in the city, do not match hers. Harrow treats the subject from Juniper's very first meeting with the women from the association through their physical appearance, since she thought they would look like stereotypical witches because that is how they are represented in cartoons, "straggle-haired and long-nosed", but they resemble, instead, "the models in Ivory soap ads, all puffed and white and fancy" (Harrow, 2020, p. 8).

The NSWA (a clear reference to the real-life historical New Woman's Suffrage Association (NWSA) down to the president, who in the book is Miss Cady Stone, referencing real-life Elizabeth Cady Stanton) welcomes Juniper and her sister Bella despite Agnes's warning ("Look, all that 'votes for women' stuff sounds real noble and all, but they don't mean women like you and me. They mean nice uptown ladies with big hats and too much time on their hands" (Harrow, 2020, p. 40)), but they soon realise that they, in fact, do not truly belong there. The tipping point of the matter is when Miss Stone states that she would turn in to the authorities whoever had performed witchery and given a bad reputation to the NSWA, and Juniper understands the kind of power the Women's Association wants is "the kind you can wear in public or argue in the courtroom or write on a slip of paper and drop in a ballot box". Juniper advocates a different type, "[t]he kind that cuts, the kind with sharp teeth and talons, the kind that starts fires and dances merry around the blaze" (Harrow, 2020, pp. 56-57).

It is for this reason that Juniper and her sisters then create The Sisters of Avalon, a witch association to fight for the restoration of women's rights, and which offers a very positive portrayal of female solidarity and sorority—in other words, sisterhood, as the association's name already suggests. This organisation can be classified inside intersectional feminism, since it welcomes all kinds of women, regardless of their age, race, or class:

> [S]ome of the women are very young, their hair plaited and their steps eager, and some of them very old. Some of them stride quickly and others skitter like mice across a kitchen floor. Some of them have apron-strings and patched elbows beneath their cloaks; some of them gleam with pearls and rings. (Harrow, 2020, p. 142)

The Sisters of Avalon provides the women with a safe space in which they can share their grievances, such as the pay gap between men and women or the unfair laws on parental rights and prostitution ("they arrested two of my girls on immorality, and not one of their customers" (Harrow, 2020, p. 145)). Moreover, this kind of sorority does not only grant women emotional benefits, but it actually has a key role in the defeat of the novel's villain. Gideon Hill is perplexed by his inability to find the sisters as they were hiding from him, but "it isn't some ancient witchcraft that's kept them hidden—it's merely the ordinary women of New Salem, the laundresses and maids and housewives who opened their doors despite the risk" (Harrow, 2020, p. 384). Moreover, the final battle against him is won not through some miraculous and enormous magical working, but thanks to the cooperation of the women involved, each of whom participates with smaller workings that result in the final victory. All in all, then, *The Once and Future Witches* provides a very positive representation of sorority and female solidarity which serves to advance the feminist message it aims to convey.

Motherhood, abortion and childbirth

As mentioned above, the character of Agnes is the one who embodies the archetype of the mother. The archetype of the mother represents, in addition to being a literal mother, the stage in which the woman is sexually active; as a result, Agnes is described as physically attractive: "She's just as pretty as Juniper remembers her: full lips and long lashes and slender neck. Juniper figures she takes after the mama she can't remember, because there's nothing of Daddy in her" (Harrow, 2020, p. 24). This sexual appeal also makes her the target of street harassment more than once in the novel, and the fact that she is indeed sexually active results in her getting pregnant.

However, Agnes has always taken a maternal role. We are told about how, in the past, "Juniper still slipped sometimes and called her [Agnes] *Mama*" (Harrow, 2020, p. 27), how, after her arrival in New Salem, she got a job as a nurse taking care of orphans, and how she "had a tendency to collect strays—the too-skinny girls who slept on the boarding-house floor because they couldn't afford beds, the too-quiet girls with bruises around their wrists" (Harrow, 2020, p. 12). This maternal role is, interestingly, presented as something which is almost instinctive in her. This can be interpreted as both her exhibiting a vocation for being a mother, or yet another instance of the reinforcement of the association between women and instinct rather than reason or logic. Regardless, Harrow also aims at subverting the traditional stereotype of the mother through the character of Agnes. Instead of presenting the mother as "weak" and "weepy", or as a woman who "give[s] birth to [her] children and drift[s] peacefully into death", Harrow turns her into "the brave one, the ruthless one, the witch who traded the birthing-chamber for the battlefield, the kitchen for the knife" (Harrow, 2020, p. 400).

Indeed, her condition as a mother is actually what urges her to participate in the revolution that her sister Juniper is so passionate about. Before learning about her pregnancy and also soon after learning about it, Agnes was reluctant to join her sisters because she feared retaliation, since she depends on her job to give her daughter the resources she needs. However, Agnes soon realises that what her daughter needs is a better world to live in, and it is, therefore, her experience of motherhood that triggers off the urge to rebel and fight.

Furthermore, throughout her adventure Agnes also finds herself reflecting on what it means to be a mother. Interestingly, her story is not exactly one of growth and self-improvement, since she does not leave behind the fear she felt. Instead, Agnes realises that it is a condition of motherhood to be *both* afraid *and* brave: mothers are afraid of what might happen to their children, but they also need to be strong to protect them and, in this case, to make the world better for them as well. She reaches this conclusion not only through her own experiences but through sorority—by meeting

another mother and reflecting on how she acts: "*I am terrified and I am terrible. I am fearful and I am something to be feared.* She meets Miss Araminta's eyes, dark and knowing, sharp and soft, and thinks maybe every mother is both things at once" (Harrow, 2020, p. 346).

It is also through Agnes's character that Harrow reflects on another important topic in feminism: abortion. Before actually deciding to carry her pregnancy to term, Agnes considers having an abortion, and she seeks the services of Madame Zina—a witch, diviner, and midwife. In this meeting, the topic of abortion is treated in a natural way, providing positive, pro-choice representation. Zina tells Agnes that there is no need to worry because she is not doing anything wrong, and that "not every woman wants a child" (Harrow, 2020, p. 63). This is a particularly important comment on the matter, since it highlights the woman's freedom of choice, rather than simply being in favour of abortion when there are health complications or when the pregnancy has resulted from a sexual aggression. Instead, Agnes is never shamed for considering the termination of her pregnancy, and she is never asked about her reasons—her not wanting to be pregnant is seen as a valid enough reason to seek out an abortion.

Obviously, Agnes finally chooses to keep her baby. However, her choice in this instance does not discredit in any way the pro-choice message explained above, especially because it is stated that Agnes has actually already had an abortion before, and that she did not feel any remorse afterwards: "She did it once before—drank it down in one bitter swallow, felt nothing but rib-shaking relief when the cramps knotted her belly—and never regretted it. Now she finds herself setting the brown paper sack on the floor, unopened" (Harrow, 2020, p. 68).

Harrow's use of the figure of a midwife is clearly inspired by one of the traits of the myth of the "burning times": the idea that midwives were particularly persecuted during the witch trials. It is important to note that, although the famously-known manual for witch hunters *Malleus Maleficarum* specifically mentions midwives, there seems to be a lack of historical evidence of such specific persecution. In actuality, midwives would often use their knowledge not for the benefit of the accused but to help the state or Church, for instance, to search for the so-called witchmarks[3] (Purkiss, 2003). The appearance of *midwife-witches* (a term used by Purkiss (2003)) in feminist witch stories is part of the myth of the "burning times", which "insists that women's knowledge of the body automatically subverts gender hierarchies" due to the "belief that there is something automatically radical about a

[3] In the 17th century witch trials, the body of the accused was examined in search of 'witchmarks' or the 'devil's mark', which was an insensitive spot to piercing and did not bleed. In some territories this was considered to be a third nipple from which the witch's familiar suckled (such is the case of England), and in other places this was proof of the witch's covenant with the Devil. It could be almost any kind of mark, from birthmarks or moles to spots on the skin that resembled insect bites (McDonald, 1997).

woman with control over the bodies of other women, since we equate that control with sexual knowledge and autonomy" (Purkiss, 2003, p. 21). While it is true that *The Once and Future Witches* includes an instance in which the midwife-witch does help the state (Madam Zina testifies against the sisters when they are tried, in order to save herself or lessen her punishment—in reality, midwives would most likely do it not to protect themselves but because they believed they were truly dealing with evil witches), midwife-witches are widely treated in the book as positive characters whose sole existence is an advancement towards equality.

One such example of a positive midwife-witch character is Mama Mags, the sisters' late grandmother. It is suggested that she gave the sisters some degree of sex education, including how to perform an abortion in case they needed it ("Mags told them [the words to perform an abortion spell] to her when she was sixteen. She hasn't forgotten." (Harrow, 2020, p. 63)), and it is stated that she would perform clandestine abortions for girls who needed it back in the countryside where the sisters come from. The girls would go to her "looking for the words and ways to unmake the babies in the bellies" for a variety of reasons, since "[n]ot all of them [were] young or unwed—some were too old for childbearing or too sick, or had too many hungry mouths already" (Harrow, 2020, p. 106). This was frowned upon by the preacher, who said it was "the Devil's darkest work", whereas Mama Mags "said it was just women's work, like everything else" (Harrow, 2020, p. 106). While this is an instance of positive representation of abortion, the fact that it is labelled as "women's work" reinforces the aforementioned belief that women knowing about female anatomy is inherently radical, rather than simply advocating the right to reproductive freedom and safe abortions regardless of who performs them.

Obviously, the midwife-witch also has the role of assisting in childbirth, which is also represented in *The Once and Future Witches*. Mama Mags is implied to have helped in childbirths, but the most important instance in which this topic is dealt with is when Agnes finally gives birth to her daughter. In this scene, Agnes is not in the best conditions to give birth—she has just been arrested by the authorities and is kept in a hospital against her will, "locked in a green-tiled room, chained and drugged, with nothing but the dull grate of men's voices for company" (Harrow, 2020, p. 307). We are told that the best (or at least standard) conditions involve there being "other women to help you bear" the pain, more specifically "[a]unts and midwives, grannies and sisters, mothers to press cool palms against your forehead and hum half-forgotten lullabies in your ears" (Harrow, 2020, p. 307). This is clearly a critique of the medicalization of childbirth and obstetric violence, which Agnes suffers too, when it is said that "a pair of men in uniforms (...) look down at her like she is a prize they intend to stuff and mount on their mantels" (Harrow, 2020, p. 308) and that the doctor sighs

“precisely like Mr. Malton sighing over a jammed loom” which causes Agnes to imagine “her blood replaced with oil, her joints with gears; a misbehaving machine instead of a woman” (Harrow, 2020, p. 308).

Soon after, her sisters come to her rescue, assisting Agnes and, therefore, embodying the figure of the midwife-witch themselves. Childbirth is, once more, presented as “women’s work,” just like in the idealised description above, when Agnes informs Bella that “[t]he doctor said the baby wasn’t coming, that she would have to be extracted” and she responds reminding her that “he was merely a man. Whereas [they] (...) are witches” (Harrow, 2020, p. 312).

Age

The third and last sister, Belladonna, embodies the archetype of the crone, which is supposed to be the last of the biological stages in a woman’s life, in which she is no longer fertile like the mother, nor attractive or energetic like the maiden, but she now has the experience and knowledge the other two might lack. Harrow chooses to attempt to subvert the archetype by focusing precisely on the crone’s wisdom. She destabilises the notion of the crone as doting and addled, absent-minded grandmothers who spoil their sons and keep soup bubbling on the stovetop”. Instead, the crone is “the canny one, the knowing one, the too-wise witch who knows the words to every curse and the ingredients for every poison” (Harrow, 2020, p. 401).

This attempt at subversion becomes problematic when we take into account that Harrow’s interpretation of the crone invisibilizes precisely the most frowned-upon trait of the crone: age. Belladonna is young and beautiful, with the only “negative” characteristic in her appearance being white streaks of hair. She remains attractive—the only quality she has of the crone is her wisdom. This plays into the existing trend in popular culture of invisibilizing old people, and especially old women. This trend exists because, in a patriarchal society, old women are not seen as useful: out of the three feminine archetypes we have covered, the crone lacks the maiden’s purity and attractiveness of youth, and the mother’s sexual appeal and nurturing nature. The crone is past childbearing age and does not care for male approval and, therefore, she is seen as useless from a patriarchal worldview (Rountree, 1997). Introducing old women in a narrative, then, challenges this patriarchal bias—which Belladonna, with her young age, does not. Therefore, she lacks the most subversive aspect of the crone.

The Once and Future Witches, however, also contains some redeeming qualities in regard to the representation of age. To begin with, Bella does have the other subversive aspect of the crone,

that of not seeking male approval, due to her being a lesbian—a topic I shall explore in more depth in one of the following sections. Moreover, towards the end of the story, when the three sisters manage to contact the Last Three of Avalon, the original crone is, indeed, a crone. Therefore, Harrow is not completely erasing the representation of older women, even if this is a very secondary character and thus relegated to the margins. Similarly, Mama Mags is also an old and wise woman whose influence is felt throughout the novel, even though she died before the action began. Finally, there is an instance in which Bella disguises herself as an old woman thanks to the magical knowledge of the sex workers that are part of the Sisters of Avalon, because "[m]en stop seeing you altogether, after a certain age" (Harrow, 2020, pp. 205-206).

Race

The Once and Future Witches can be regarded as pertaining to intersectional feminism due to the inclusion and positive representation not only of different classes, as mentioned before, but also of different cultures and ethnicities, and the struggles they face. Throughout the story we meet Russian, Greek, African-American, and Native American witches —something unusual in these narratives—, and from the very beginning, in the introduction, we are already confronted with the reality of racism and colonialism: "The preacher back home says (…) the Indians and Africans ought to be thanking us on their knees for freeing them from their own savage magics" (Harrow, 2020, p. viii).

The way in which Harrow integrates these different cultures into her worldbuilding is by including different magical systems for each of them. In this way, while our protagonists' witchery is based on rhymes and herbs, other kinds of witchery "come in odd forms and unlikely languages—Spanish prayers and Creole songs and Choctaw stories, star-patterns and dances and drum-beats" (Harrow, 2020, p. 507). While using such a Western-centred word like witchcraft to refer to these kinds of cultures is somewhat questionable, the inclusion of these minorities certainly serves to advance an intersectional feminist message.

The ethnicity that is given more attention is, by far, the African-American. Throughout the novel we are confronted with racist realities, such as the Jim Crow[4] laws being in effect (which are labelled as absurd) or the existence of an exhibition in which living coloured people ("natives") are showcased, including "the last witch-doctor of the Congo," ("a withered African woman with an iron

---

[4] The Jim Crow laws, enforced from 1884 to 1964, created the legal segregation by race in the United States.

witch-collar locked around her neck" (Harrow, 2020, p. 87)). Moreover, we are also told about the NWSA's opinion on the inclusion of coloured women in the association:

> The New Salem Women's Association is divided on the question of the color-line. Some worry that the inclusion of colored women might tarnish their respectable reputation; others feel they ought to spend a few more decades being grateful for their freedom before they agitate for anything so radical as rights. Most of them agree it would be far more convenient if colored women remained in the Colored Women's League. (Harrow, 2020, p. 60)

Most importantly, there is a black character who joins the three sisters in their adventure: Cleopatra Quinn, who is a writer for *The New Salem Defender*, a "radical colored paper infamous for its seditious editorials", the office of which "has been burned and relocated at least twice" (Harrow, 2020, p. 58). Cleo, who descends from slaves that used to work at a rice plantation, lives in New Cairo, the black neighbourhood of New Salem, and a place where public transport does not reach, policemen are scared of patrolling at night, and which has a completely different arrangement of streets from the rest of the city.

Cleopatra and Belladonna eventually fall in love and start a relationship (a topic I will cover in the following section), and it is through her that Bella learns some secrets related to coloured witches. On the one hand, Bella discovers the truth behind the building of New Salem: since the city was built in a rush after the burning of Old Salem, they had slaves build it. In this way, Harrow also includes in her novel criticism of this episode in American history: "Slaves, in the nation that so recently fought for freedom. Slaves, building the City Without Sin" (Harrow, 2020, p. 196). These slaves took advantage of the situation and built a secret tunnel system below the city through which to move without being seen. Mixing historical fiction and fantasy once again, this is part of the Underground Railroad[5] in the world of *The Once and Future Witches*. On the other hand, Cleo also tells Bella about the existence (and her membership to) the Daughters of Tituba, a clandestine witch group, similar to the Sisters of Avalon, but made up by descendants of slaves and led by Araminta, Cleo's mother.

Despite the Sisters of Avalon being an inclusive group that welcomes all kinds of witches from any background, witches of colour in the novel tend to behave in a guarded or defensive way, which evidences the fact that they suffer the double oppression of gender and race. It is for this reason that the Daughters of Tituba are reluctant to help the Eastwoods towards the end of the novel ("(…) three white ladies who know all their secrets wind up in the claws of Gideon Hill. You could betray

[5] The Underground Railroad was an organised system of safe houses ('stations') and routes in the United States that aimed to aid fugitives of slavery and accompany them safely to free states or to Canada in the first half of the 19th century.

us all." (Harrow, 2020, p. 425)), why Cleo prioritises the Daughters of Tituba when Gideon is elected mayor and leaves the Eastwoods to help her community ("It will be worse for me and mine. It always is." (Harrow, 2020, p. 370)), and also the reason why one of the Native American witches refuses to share her form of witchery with the rest of the Sisters of Avalon because "[n]ot every word and way belongs to [them]" (Harrow, 2020, p. 174) and because, since they are not fighting for the rights of Native Americans, she does not consider them comrades.

The Eastwoods sometimes find themselves clashing with the opinions of the witches belonging to these ethnic minorities. For instance, Cleo is sometimes disappointed or "pities" Bella's poor knowledge of historical events related to witches of colour:

> "(...) All the true witches were burned centuries ago."
>
> "All of them, Miss Eastwood?" There's a hint of pity in Quinn's voice. "How, then, did Cairo manage to repel the Ottomans and the redcoats both for decades, despite all their rifles and ships? Why did Andrew Jackson leave those Choctaw in Mississippi? Out of the goodness of his black little heart?" The pity sharpens, turns scathing. "Do you really think the slavers found every witch aboard their ships and tossed her overboard?" (Harrow, 2020, p. 74)

However, through their contact with witches of colour, the Eastwoods become aware of their privileges and the fact that they had never truly questioned the status quo in relation to the struggles that they face. Bella is uncomfortable when *she* becomes the racial minority whenever she visits New Cairo ("During her daylight visits to New Cairo she's felt noticed, perhaps a little out of place, but she's never felt so thoroughly foreign. She wonders if this is how Quinn feels on the north end" (Harrow, 2020, p. 201)), and she questions the opinions of the NWSA on coloured women, as well as what she was taught about them:

> Beatrice herself suspects that two separate-but-equal organizations are far less effective than a single united one, and that their daddy was as wrong about freedmen needing to go back to Africa as he was about women minding their place—but she's never worried overmuch about it. She feels an uncomfortable twist of shame in her belly. (Harrow, 2020, p. 60)

Harrow, then, characterises her main characters as initially ignorant individuals who, through their contact with other oppressed minorities they do not belong to, become aware of their privileges and learn to side with them, therefore also showcasing the benefits of intersectional feminism.

Queerness

The Once and Future Witches also contains queer representation, mainly through Cleo and Bella's lesbian relationship. Walker (2021) claims that the figure of the witch is inherently queer because both witches and queer individuals are characterised by their sole existence being a challenge to heteropatriarchal standards. Walker (2021) compares witches to lesbians in her analysis. Lesbians are often viewed from a patriarchal perspective as not-women, because one of the traits that characterises women is their wish to appeal to men. Similarly, witches are often classified separately from women, and therefore the witch (just like the lesbian) "dismantles the binary of male/female" (Walker, 2021, p. 138) and "demonstrates the fragility of the social constructions of gender and, therefore, can be argued as beyond gender, and beyond human, by representing the figure of the ultimate queer Other" (Walker, 2021, p. 145). Despite that, finding queer witches in popular media is notoriously difficult. Therefore, Harrow offers, once again, representation of another marginalised collective.

Both Bella and Cleo are lesbians, and their relationship with their sexual orientation differs, thus also providing a diversity of representation in queer experiences. It is stated that, 'back home,' there were rumours about Bella, and that her father sent her to St. Hale's, a religious boarding school for 'straying girls', where she was punished out of such 'tendencies'—which could be interpreted as conversion therapy. Part of Bella's personal journey in the book is all about her learning to accept her identity and regaining confidence in herself. In contrast, Cleo is a notably confident woman from the very beginning—she is, in fact, the one who helps Bella to improve her own self-perception. Moreover, Cleo is part of a marriage arrangement in which both partners are homosexual and got married in order to avoid suspicions:

> "[Mr. Quinn] Does not live at this address, nor has he ever." Bella blinks several times and Quinn explains gently, "The two of us grew up together, and understood very young that neither of us was interested in… the usual arrangement. He lives in Baltimore with a very nice gentleman friend and a spoiled dog named Lord Byron." (Harrow, 2020, p. 334)

Cleo and Bella's relationship is generally treated positively in the novel, and it has a good influence on Bella's self-esteem. However, we can also find instances of discrimination against them. When the sisters are trying to hide from Gideon and Cleo is with them, not everyone is willing to help them, as they find themselves unsettled by Cleo's skin colour and her relationship with Bella. Moreover, Juniper is also shown to be prejudiced against them, once again showing that Harrow's characters are flawed and unaware of their privileges, but willing to learn:

> It unsettled Juniper, to own the truth. True, Bella's cheeks were flushed and her stutter was gone, but Juniper recalled the preacher's admonitions about man and wife and the natural order of things. She asked Agnes about it one evening and was told in no uncertain terms to mind her own damn business. (Harrow, 2020, p. 357)

Finally, there is another queer couple in the novel, although it is only briefly mentioned: Two of the members of the Sisters of Avalon, Jennie and Inez, are also involved romantically. Furthermore, Jennie is transgender. Harrow incorporates this identity in her novel by having Jennie know men's magic, rather than women's, since she had been brought up as a male. The discrimination against trans people is also represented, through the fact that, when Jennie is arrested, she is put in the men's workhouse, her skirts are burnt, and her hair is cut "brutally short" (Harrow, 2020, p. 433).

Men and patriarchy

The last topic that I chose to analyse about *The Once and Future Witches* is its portrayal of men. As I have already mentioned, the blame of the purges is placed on the Church and men. And, indeed, men are generally portrayed negatively in the novel, placed in antagonist roles and overall used to represent patriarchy as a whole. Throughout the novel, we meet several male secondary characters that insult or even molest our protagonists. One such character is Mr. Malton, the floor boss at the mill Agnes works in at the beginning of the novel, who often molests the workers there: "The floor boss leers idly as the girls file past, reaching for skirts and blouses with pinching fingers" (Harrow, 2020, p. 12-13). Another example is Floyd, the man who impregnated Agnes, and who seems to be unable to accept that Agnes is no longer interested in him: "He curses her, calls her a witch and a whore and a hundred other names she learned from her daddy first" (Harrow, 2020, p. 14).

There are, however, two important characters who personify patriarchy perfectly: the sisters' father and the main antagonist, Gideon Hill (and his previous incarnations). The sisters' father has been deceased since the beginning of the novel, and yet his presence affects the whole narrative, because he only taught them "what a fox teaches chickens—how to run, how to tremble, how to outlive the bastard" (Harrow, 2020, p. vii). He was abusive towards the Eastwood sisters, as he used to lock them in the cellar when they would misbehave ("Her daddy would say: *Don't forget what you are, girl.* Then he would toss her down in the worm-eaten dark and hiss the answer: *Nobody.*" (Harrow, 2020, p. 9)) and it is implied that he also hit them ("Their daddy was a mean drunk with hard knuckles who never loved anything or anyone as much as he loved corn liquor" (Harrow, 2020, p. 104)).

Gideon Hill is perhaps the character who embodies patriarchy the best. He is an old man who is always accompanied by his dog, which is very fittingly named Lady, and which always flinches and cowers in front of his master. His daughter, Grace Wiggins, is the leader of the Christian Women's Union, who stand against women's suffrage and are "always hassling street-witches and trying to save girls from the whorehouse whether or not they want to be saved (they mostly don't)" (Harrow, 2020, p. 15). Grace, however, seems to be a metaphor for the alienated woman, since at the end of the book she frees herself from Gideon's control and turns against him. Towards the end of the novel the sisters discover that Gideon is actually a witch (and therefore using women's magic) who has virtually acquired immortality by binding his soul to different bodies throughout time. It turns out, then, that Gideon Hill also used to be none other than George of Hyll, who started the purges against witches—and he was able to do so precisely because he was a man: "George of Hyll was not a Saint then. He was merely a witch, no different than the witches he hunted—except that he was a man, and man's power was God-given" (Harrow, 2020, p. 406). When he is defeated, interestingly, he turns young, which subverts the trope of the wicked witch being punished with old age at the end of the story. However, it remains unclear how the metaphor of witchcraft as women's rights relates to Gideon being a witch.

Besides these specific characters, we can find many instances throughout the novel in which men as a whole are criticised. In fact, on most of the occasions on which men are mentioned, they are portrayed negatively. Thus, for instance, it is said that "no man ever loved a woman's strength—they only love the place where it runs out. They love a strong will finally broken, a straight spine bent" (Harrow, 2020, p. 225), that "men are fools when they think they've won" (Harrow, 2020, p. 408), and that "powerful men only keep their promises when they have to, and they never have to" (Harrow, 2020, p. 441). Men are therefore clearly villainized. The result of this tendency is actually not the advancement of feminism, but rather promoting some sort of female superiority over men (e.g., Juniper "rather likes the sight of a man on his knees" (Harrow, 2020, p. 321)), rather than equality. Harrow makes the mistake of blaming men, rather than patriarchy.

There is only one exception to the overwhelming majority of patriarchal men: August Lee. August is a feminist man who challenges the patriarchy through his behaviour—while, at the beginning, he shows himself somewhat prejudiced about breaking gender roles (when Agnes asks him to teach her men's magic and he says it is the law of nature for women to be unable to work men's magic), he is the only one who is willing to learn and improve, which could be interpreted as him undergoing a process of deconstruction.

It is because of this that August becomes Agnes's romantic interest. However, Harrow treats their relationship notably differently from, for instance, Bella and Cleo's. While Bella and Cleo's relationship is always portrayed as something positive albeit frowned upon by those who are prejudiced, Agnes and August's romance is seen as Agnes showing weakness; for example, there is an instance in which Agnes "falters, suddenly more woman than witch" (Harrow, 2020, p. 331) when she lets her feelings towards August show. In the world of *The Once and Future Witches*, as has already been established, the difference between a woman and a witch is that the latter is empowered (if witchcraft is a metaphor for women's rights, witches are women with power), and thus this quote implies that a woman showing feelings towards a man is not as empowered as a fully independent or single one (or even a lesbian one, since sapphic relationships *are* portrayed as empowering). Moreover, August is constantly treated as ignorant simply due to his condition as a man. For example, after Agnes has given birth and she wants to move and walk almost immediately afterwards, his preoccupation towards her is treated as paternalism, as something that bothers Agnes, rather than making her feel loved and cared for. Agnes's familiar silences him, and he practically bows while assuring her that he will never doubt her again, which shows the dynamic of their relationship. Similarly, there is an instance in which Bella refers to him as 'Agnes's man', after which the following comment (implied to be Agnes's thoughts) is inserted: "*Agnes's man*. What a novel, rather appealing arrangement, to own a man rather than being owned by him" (Harrow, 2020, p. 344). In addition, Agnes does not truly admit to her feelings towards August, nor kisses him, until he has risked his life for her. While Cleo and Bella's relationship unfolds naturally and romantically, Agnes keeps herself guarded until August has demonstrated his loyalty towards her. Although it makes sense for Agnes not to trust men after her relationship with Floyd and due to her defensive tendencies (she tries to keep people away to avoid getting hurt when she cares too much for them, and throughout the novel she learns to let others into her life), the recurrent negative comments about men as a whole, including August in particular, and the portrayal of their relationship as unequal show that Harrow, in her attempt to target patriarchy, demonises men and fails to articulate a discourse that favours egalitarian relationships instead.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to analyse the portrayal of witches in the novel *The Once and Future Witches* and explore the intricate interplay between the figure of the witch and gender. By delving into various themes such as witchcraft, worldbuilding, sisterhood, motherhood, age, race,

queerness, and the portrayal of men and patriarchy, I sought to gauge the extent to which the novel contains a discourse that advances a feminist agenda.

The key findings of this research shed light on the complex representation of witches within the novel. The portrayal of the witches largely aligns with current postfeminist trends in popular witch narratives in that, despite the intention of telling a story of female empowerment, it disseminates certain patriarchal standards. For instance, the narrative of the novel fits perfectly into the myth of the "burning times", which is historically inaccurate and perpetuates a narrative where women's power is relegated to a lost past and associated with an absence of civilization. Additionally, the invisibilisation of old women within the novel further reinforces patriarchal norms.

Nevertheless, *The Once and Future Witches* also advances an intersectional feminist ideology. The positive portrayal of sorority, the nuanced treatment of motherhood, abortion, and childbirth, the inclusion of different cultures and races, and the representation of queer witches all contribute to fostering an inclusive and progressive narrative. However, in the case of the portrayal of men, Harrow appears to be pushing the feminist agenda to such an extent that the message becomes somewhat regressive, as she seems to be blaming men (the individuals) instead of patriarchy (the system) for the oppression of women.

This study makes a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on gender representation in popular narratives and literature. By critically examining the portrayal of witches and their intersection with gender dynamics within *The Once and Future Witches*, I have provided insights into the ongoing trends in feminist witch narratives. This analysis serves as a valuable case study, highlighting both the progress and limitations within contemporary portrayals of witches. However, as a single case study, my findings are limited to this specific novel. Future research could expand upon this study by analysing other similar books or conducting comparative studies to explore the broader landscape of feminist witch narratives.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the complex portrayal of witches in *The Once and Future Witches* and the intricate interplay between the figure of the witch and gender. My analysis revealed a mixture of perpetuated patriarchal standards, advances in intersectional feminist messages, and instances where the feminist agenda may have been pushed too far.

References

Ackerman, H. [Executive Producer]. (1964-1972). *Bewitched* [TV Series]. Screen Gems; Ashmont Productions.

Benioff, D., Weiss, D. B., Martin, G. R. R., Strauss, C., Doelger, F., Caulfield, B., Cogman, B., Sapochnik, M., & Nutter, D. [Executive Producers]. (2011-2019). *Game of Thrones* [TV Series]. HBO Entertainment; Television 360; Grok! Television; Generator Entertainment; Startling Television; Bighead Littlehead.

Biller, A. [Director]. (2016). *The Love Witch* [Film]. Anna Biller Productions.

Burge, C. M., Kern, B., Spelling, A., & Vincent, E. D. [Executive Producers]. (1998-2006). *Charmed* [TV Series]. Spelling Television.

Creed, B. (1993). *The monstrous-feminine: film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Douglas, S. J. (2010). *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild*. Macmillan.

Faludi, S. (2006). *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. Crown.

Fleming, A. [Director]. (1996). *The Craft* [Film].

Gaskill, M. (2008). The pursuit of reality: recent research into the history of witchcraft. *The Historical Journal*, *51* (4), 1069-1088.

Greno, N. & Howard, B. [Directors]. (2010). *Tangled* [Film]. Walt Disney Pictures; Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Harrow, A. E. (2020). *The Once and Future Witches*. Orbit.

Hart, P. [Executive Producer]. (1996-2003). *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* [TV Series]. Archie Comics; Hartbreak Films; Finishing the Hat Productions; Viacom Productions.

Iwakami, A. [Executive Producer]. (2011). *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* [TV Series]. Aniplex.

Krieger, L. T., Goldwater, J., Schechter, S., Aguirre-Sacasa, R., & Berlanti, G. [Executive Producers]. (2018-2020). *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* [TV Series]. Berlanti Productions; Archie Comics; Muckle Man Productions; Warner Bros. Television.

Lemish, D.; Muhlbauer, V. (2012). “Can't Have it All”: Representations of Older Women in Popular Culture. *Women & Therapy, 35(3-4*), 165-180.

Lykke, N. (2010). *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*. Routledge.

McDonald, S. W. (1997). The Devil's Mark and the Witch-Prickers of Scotland. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, *90*.

McRobbie, A. (2004). Post-feminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies, 4(3), 255-264.*

Murphy, R. & Falchuk, B. [Executive Producers]. (2013-2014). *American Horror Story: Coven* [TV Series].

Negra, D. & Tasker, Y. (2007). *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Amsterdam University Press.

Purkiss, D. (2003). *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations (English Edition)* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Read, P. (2006). *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883-1969*. New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

Rountree, K. (1997). The New Witch of the West: Feminists Reclaim the Crone. *Journal of Popular Culture*, *30* (4), 211-229.

Sempruch, J. (2008). *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature*. Purdue University Press.

Walker, A. (2021). Witches and their Queer Representation of Gender in Terry Pratchett's Equal Rites and Weird Sisters. *Exclamat!on: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *5*, 131-147.

Whedon, J., Greenwalt, D., Noxon, M., Kuzui, F. R., & Kuzui, K. [Executive Producers]. (1997-2003). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [TV Series]. Mutant Enemy Productions; Sandollar Television; Kuzui Enterprises; 20th Century Fox Television.