Hexing the Hivemind: An Exploration of the Ambiguous Witch Archetype in Reddit Communities

The Magic Circle by J.W Waterhouse (1886)

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Abstract

The figure of the witch has been interpreted in various ways through centuries in Western culture, from a symbol of darkness and femininity to a declaration of independence and feminist empowerment. In this thesis, the researcher explores the discourse about witches on the online platform Reddit, known for its diverse and unconventional communities. I examine how language and visual representations are used to shape, challenge, endorse, or reflect ambiguity in the portrayal of witches on Reddit. The research also delves into how Reddit users negotiate the ambiguity of the witch archetype in their discussions and representations of witches, and to what extent these discussions reflect or challenge broader cultural understandings of witches as an ambiguous archetype. The methodology involves analysing two Reddit communities as case studies: 'r/HillaryForPrison,' a hate page about Hillary Clinton that represents the witch as a malevolent figure, and 'r/WitchesVsPatriarchy,' a subreddit that embraces and challenges the mystical aspects of femininity, representing the witch as a benevolent figure. Through a comprehensive review of literature and analysis of posts from these subreddits, I aim to shed light on the multifaceted nature of the witch as an archetype and its implications for gender and power dynamics in contemporary online discourse.

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Introduction

I have loved witches forever. Obsessed with Harry Potter as a young girl, fascinated by the world of magic and dreaming of possessing magical abilities. Hermoine Granger, Minerva McGonagall, Circe, Bonnie Bennet, Maleficent, when I think about witches these women come to mind, these admirable women being symbols of feminine power and independence. I never connected these figures of the witch to historical narratives about the witch. However, my perception of witches changed when I grew older and noticed how my beloved figure of the witch was used to demonize and offend women. I connected the historical persecution of women as witches, used to undermine and malign them throughout centuries to my idea of the empowered, inspiring women as witches, revealing the complexity of the witch archetype and its cultural significance.

As mentioned above, the figure of the witch can be subjected to various interpretations, from being labelled as "a symbol of everything that is dark about the past and woman" (Purkiss 1996, 2) to being viewed as "a potent symbol of rebellion," a "declaration of feminine independence," and an "engine of activism" (Sollee 2017, 47). This ambiguous archetype has both empowered and marginalized women, reflecting broader cultural understandings of gender and power dynamics. As a fan of Reddit, a platform known for its diverse and sometimes unconventional communities, I have been intrigued by the ways in which language, headlines, plots, and genre are used to shape, challenge, endorse, or reflect ambiguity in the discourse about witches. Reddit is a unique space where nothing seems too crazy, and communities with shared interests thrive. However, it is also a space where derogatory language and harmful stereotypes can perpetuate, including the use of the word "witch" as an insult to demean and undermine women in politics and other positions of authority. The word "witch" as an insult is rooted in the long history of witch-hunts and the persecution of women accused of witchcraft. The use of the term "witch" to describe women in derogatory ways reproduces misogynistic stereotypes and reflects sexism and misogyny. With women already having to fight and work harder to get into positions of power, these appellations are not only a nuisance, but also dangerous.

On the other hand, the figure of the witch has also been reclaimed as a symbol of feminist empowerment and rebellion. Many women have embraced the witch archetype as a declaration of their independence and used it as a form of self-identification to assert their strength and autonomy. This duality of the witch archetype, as both a feminist symbol and a

tool of misogyny, underscores the complexity of its cultural meanings and the need for further exploration.

In this thesis, I will delve into the discourse about witches, examining what narratives are utilized to shape, challenge, endorse, or reflect ambiguity in the portrayal of witches. By exploring the interplay between the ambiguous witch archetype in Reddit communities and the broader cultural understanding of witches, this research seeks to shed light on the multifaceted nature of the witch as an archetype and its implications for gender and power dynamics in contemporary online discourse. In the context of this thesis, the term 'archetype' refers to a recurring symbol, theme, or character that represents universal patterns of human behaviour or experiences across different cultures and time periods (Oxford English Dictionary 2021, s.v. "archetype"). The figure of the witch can be seen as an archetype because it embodies a range of symbolic meanings and associations that have persisted throughout history and continue to shape contemporary cultural discourse. By examining how internet communities use language, sources, headlines, story order, and genre to shape, challenge, endorse, or reflect ambiguity in the discourse about the witch archetype, I aim to shed light on broader cultural understandings of this multifaceted and complex figure.

I will discuss this ambiguity of the archetype of the witch on American social news aggregation, content rating, and discussion platform Reddit. The research is driven by the research question: *How do internet communities (specifically on Reddit) shape, challenge, endorse or reflect ambiguity in the discourse about the figure of the witch, and how does this relate to the broader cultural understanding of the witch as an ambiguous archetype?* In order to answer this question, the following sub questions are relevant: How do different Reddit communities construct their understanding of the witch, and what role do language, headlines, plots, and genre play in this process? How do Reddit users negotiate the ambiguity of the witch archetype in their discussions and representations of the figure of the witch? To what extent do these discussions and representations reflect or challenge broader cultural understandings of the witch as an ambiguous archetype?

Methodology

In my theoretical framework in chapter one, I will discuss witchcraft and the narratives in which it can be understood. Upon substantial review of the literature, a visible pattern emerged whereby the ideas and theories discussed by scholars could be systematically

categorized into five prominent thematic areas: (i) gender and the witch, (ii) fear, knowledge and oppression, (iii) accusations and gossip, (iv) agency and the witch, (v) posthumanism and the cyborg. These five themes will be the starting point and base for this thesis and will help understand where the malevolent and benevolent figures of the witch are built on.

In chapters two and three I will be discussing two Reddit communities (subreddits) as case studies. The two Reddit communities (subreddits) I will be analysing are 'r/HillaryForPrison' and 'r/WitchesVsPatriarchy'. It should be noted that both subreddits are publicly accessible, so there are no privacy concerns. The subreddit 'r/HillaryForPrison' is a hate page about Hillary Clinton. They describe themselves as: "r/HillaryForPrison is for everyone who wants to put Crooked Hillary IN FEDERAL PRISON WHERE SHE BELONGS. It's the largest from our series of "For Prison" subreddits. Join them both and post your incriminating evidence to expose these criminals". They repeatedly refer to Hillary Clinton (and other female political figures such as Nancy Pelosi) as a witch. The subreddit has 54.8k members who post memes, pictures, edits, videos, and hate-messages. This subreddit will function as a representation of the witch as a malevolent figure.

'r/WitchesVsPatriarchy' describe themselves as: "a woman-centered sub with a witchy twist, aimed at healing, supporting, and uplifting one another through humor and magic. The goal is to at once embrace, and poke fun at, the mystical aspects of femininity that have been previously demonized and/or devalued by the patriarchy." It has 679k members who ask each other for advice, ask questions about feminism, share experiences and memes. This subreddit will function as a representation of the witch as a benevolent figure.

Since both subreddits exist for a few years now, there are a lot of posts, so to demarcate my research material, I searched for the word 'witch' in the search bar within the subreddit 'r/HillaryForPrison' and used the posts that came up. For the 'r/WitchesvsPatriarchy' subreddit, I used the posts posted in the month of February 2023. In this thesis I will be discussing five posts per chapter (so 10 posts in total). To narrow it down more after this coarse selection, I screenshotted all the relevant posts that potentially aligned with the theoretical framework and narratives surrounding the ambiguity of the witch. Then, I categorized these screenshots into folders corresponding to the most appropriate themes (some screenshots were relevant to multiple themes). To choose the final research material, I evaluated which posts touched upon the most themes and I found most relevant and interesting to analyse.

For the analysis of the posts, I employed a (critical) discourse analysis approach rooted in the field of media studies as my methodological framework. This approach facilitated an

examination of the language and visual elements of the posts in the Reddit communities, with a particular focus on how they relate to the tropes associated with the ambiguity of the archetype of the witches. The analysis is centered on unpacking the different visual and language elements in the threads. I will be using a critical discourse analysis, a way of analysing how language is used to create meaning in society (Fairclough 2013, 11), to analyse the language and visuals used in the posts to examine how these are used in relation to other social elements like power, institutions, beliefs, and cultural values. CDA will be used to analyse the relationship between semiotic and other social elements, considering three levels of social reality: social structures, practices, and events (Fairclough 2013, 11-12). Through this critical discourse analysis, I was able to unpack the systematically examined themes, discourses, and ideologies present in the subreddits. Examining these involved a close reading of each post, analysing the ways in which language, headlines, plots, and genre shape, challenge, endorse, or reflect discourses (Mendes 2012, 558) about the archetype of the witch. This way I treat discourse as a social practice, considering language and pictures as ways of doing things (Gill 2000, 175). In the context of the analysed subreddits, I studied the content of the posts, examining both the language used in discussions about witches and witchcraft, as well as the visual representations of the archetype of the witch. This approach allows an in-depth exploration of the ways in which discourse is used to construct and convey perceptions, representations, and interpretations of witches and witchcraft within these subreddits.

In chapter 4 of my analysis: 'Hexed Identities: Navigating the Complexity of the Witch Archetype in Online Discourse,' I did a comparative examination of the patterns, similarities, and differences of the analyses presented in chapters 2 and 3, revisiting the five themes: (i) gender and the witch, (ii) fear, knowledge, and oppression, (iii) accusations and gossip, (iv) agency and the witch, and (v) posthumanism and the cyborg. To facilitate the identification of patterns between the chapters, I used a colour-coding system to align the findings of the analysis with the corresponding themes. I used the work-files of my second and third chapter and (electronically) highlighted sentences corresponding to the colour of the theme that sentence corresponded with (e.g., sentences highlighted in blue corresponded to gender, yellow to posthumanism, green to agency etc.). This facilitated a side-by-side comparison of the findings, enabling the identification of similarities, differences, and patterns in the analyses.

Chapter one

UNVEILING THE WITCH: TRACING THE FOUNDATION OF WITCH NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

The archetype of the witch is soiled with misogynist, racist and classist narratives in society. These narratives emerge from the 17th century witch-hunts, where women were accused and persecuted for practicing witchcraft. This chapter will explore the foundation of the narratives surrounding witchcraft, that still exist in contemporary (internet) culture. Attempts to pin down what or who a witch is in broad terms have proven challenging, with scholars and historians struggling to provide a definitive answer. The lack of a specific definition is rooted in the complex and multifaceted nature of witchcraft and the figure of the witch, which varies across cultures, regions, and time periods. It can be said that the vast majority of those accused of witchcraft were women. Studies indicate that up to 90% of those accused and persecuted for witchcraft were female (Hester 1992, 108). This gender imbalance underscores the deeply rooted misogyny dominant in the historical narratives and practices surrounding witchcraft. The exact number of women who were killed due to witchcraft accusations remains a debate among scholars (Federici 2013). Estimates range from thousands to millions, with an intermediate figure pointing to hundreds of thousands of women being killed, not even taking into account the women that suffered torture and other forms of violence as a result of being accused of witchcraft. In conclusion, this chapter will provide a comprehensive exploration of the five different themes related to witchcraft accusations and witch-hunting, in the Western context, particularly in Europe and the United States, shedding light on the complex and multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. Through examining the roles of gender, fear, knowledge, oppression, accusations and gossip, agency, and posthumanism, I hope to offer a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary implications of witchcraft accusations and their significance in shaping societal norms, beliefs, and power dynamics and understand how the past continues to influence the present (Federici 2004, 12).

Gender and the witch

Marianne Hester, researcher of gender-based violence in the UK and internationally, whose work focuses on tackling violence and abuse including domestic and sexual violence, argued in her 1992 book how the 17th century witch-hunts were a highly gendered phenomenon used as a form of social control of women (Hester 1992, 4). Her book is a feminist analysis of the social construction of women as lewd or wicked in European history. The book examines the

ways in which women have been demonized and oppressed throughout history, particularly through accusations of witchcraft and accusations of sexual promiscuity. Hester argues that "the witch-hunts may be seen as an instance of sexual violence against women, relying on sexual constructs of masculinity and especially femininity, and they constituted an important part of the dynamics of male domination in 16th and 17th century England" (ibid., 4). She provides a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which patriarchal[1] power structures have shaped perceptions of women and how these perceptions have been used to justify oppression and violence against women. This ties in with the ideas of James Sharpe (1991), member of the Royal Historical Society and professor emeritus of early modern history at the University of York, renowned for his expertise in the fields of witchcraft and crime and punishment in early modern England. In his article on accusations of witchcraft and gender, he argues that while both men and women were accused of witchcraft, women were more likely to be prosecuted (Sharpe 1991, 153). He discusses how witchcraft accusations were often tied to gendered ideas about women and shows how mostly unmarried or widowed women who did not conform to societal expectations were accused of witchcraft (ibid., 156). Because these women threatened early modern traditional gender roles, such as women being unmarried, rebellious and independent, accusations of witchcraft served as a means of controlling and punishing them (ibid., 157). This suggests a relationship between witchcraft and misogyny in early modern England, as the cultural stereotype of the witch was often associated with negative ideas about women, such as their supposed susceptibility to temptation and their capacity for maliciousness (ibid., 156).

While Hester (1992) and Sharpe (1991) argue that witch-hunts were highly gendered, Christina Larner, British historian, focused on the history of witchcraft in Scotland, discusses in her chapter "Was witch-hunting women-hunting?" (1984) how the gendered nature of witch-hunting has been overemphasized. Where Sharpe (1991) already said that both men and women were accused of witchcraft, Larner (1984) argues how the primary targets of witch-hunts were not specifically women, but people who were generally seen as social deviants or threats to established power structures (Larner 1984, 99). She suggests that the focus on women in witch-hunts was largely due to cultural and religious beliefs about women's

[1] The patriarchy refers to a social system in which men hold primary power and dominance in various aspects of society, including politics, economics, and culture, often at the expense of women and other marginalized genders. It is a system that perpetuates gender inequality and discrimination, where men are typically privileged and afforded greater opportunities and resources than women. The patriarchy is deeply ingrained in many societies around the world and can manifest in different ways, such as gender norms, stereotypes, and institutionalized discrimination.

inherent susceptibility to sin and temptation, as well as their perceived roles as healers, midwives, and caretakers (ibid., 99). In this way, the study of witchcraft and witch-hunting can offer insights into larger social and political dynamics of the early modern period, such as the tensions between centralized authority and local communities[2] (ibid., 102), the emergence of a new scientific worldview[3] and the changing roles of women in society[4] (ibid., 103).

These efforts to enforce strict moral, ideological standards and law and order, tend to create 'deviants'. One group of such deviants were witches, who emerged as a result of the intersection between traditional sexist beliefs and the changing religious, political and social landscape (Sharpe 1991, 155), which can be connected to the rise of capitalism. With the upcoming of capitalism, witchcraft became a female crime (Federici 2004, 179). In her book *'Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation'* (2004), Italian Marxist feminist scholar, writer, and activist Silvia Federici discusses how the witch hunts in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries were not merely a result of religious superstition but were instead a deliberate effort by the ruling class to undermine and suppress forms of resistance to the emerging capitalist order (Federici 2004, 14). One of the ways in which the ruling class sought to eliminate these forms of resistance was through the persecution of those who were seen as witches (Federici 2004). Federici argues that accusations of witchcraft were often directed at women who were skilled in herbal medicine or midwifery, as well as those who were unmarried or who had other non-normative social roles (ibid., 200-201). By targeting these women, the ruling class was able to suppress forms of knowledge and social practices that were seen as threatening to their power (ibid., 15). In this way, Federici argues that the persecution of witches was a key element in the development of capitalism, and that it was part of a broader effort to undermine alternative forms of social organization and resistance.

While Christina Larner (1984) argues that the gendered nature of witch-hunting has been overemphasized, it is important to acknowledge that gender played a significant role in who was accused and persecuted for witchcraft. Larner's argument challenges the idea that witch-hunting was solely focused on persecuting women and suggests that the broader social

[2] During the early modern period there were often tensions between central authorities, such as monarchies or the Catholic Church, and local communities, with their own local traditions, customs, and beliefs. Witchcraft accusations and trials were often conducted by local authorities, and Larner suggests that the study of witchcraft can provide insights into how these tensions played out in the context of witch-hunting (Larner 1984, 102).
[3] This period saw the rise of scientific inquiry, empirical observation, and the development of new theories about the physical and natural world. Larner (1984) shows how changing ideas about science and the natural world may have influenced beliefs and practices related to witchcraft and witch-hunting.
[4] The changing roles of women during the early modern period were shaped by factors such as economic changes, shifting gender norms, religious and cultural shifts, and changing family dynamics (Larner 1984).

and political dynamics of the period should not be overlooked. However, it is also important to recognize that women were targeted for reasons related to their gender, including beliefs about their inherent susceptibility to sin and temptation, as well as their roles as healers, midwives, and caretakers. In short, while it is true that the gendered nature of witch-hunting should not be the only focus of analysis, it is still an important aspect that cannot be ignored. Witch-hunts were a complex phenomenon with multiple factors at play, and it is important to take a nuanced approach when examining them. The history of witchcraft and gender is complex, with cultural stereotypes and (changing) social dynamics playing a significant role in the portrayal of witches as predominantly female.

Fear, knowledge, and oppression

Throughout history, witches have been persecuted for various reasons. According to conflict-strategic persecution perspectives, witches were pursued as a means of controlling threatening persons or groups (Jensen 2007, 144). Similarly, scapegoat perspectives suggest that witches were pursued as a communal catharsis[5] or as a diversionary strategy by elites to structure and deflect blame (ibid., 144). However, from the early modern period women were viewed as credible allies of Satan and they became plausible candidates for accepting credit or taking blame for matters as consequential for human society as plague and subsistence crises (ibid., 147). The narrative about witches that is often seen is that the women being accused of witchcraft are portrayed as powerless, but Jensen (2007) argues that women most likely to be accused of witchcraft must have had some degree of power:

"The most promising scapegoats would be drawn from groups with sufficient visibility and power to be *credible targets of blame.* For example, targets with absolutely no power would involve the least risk of retaliation. However, they are not the most credible candidates for displacing blame. The most powerless members of a social system would not be plausible candidates for accepting credit or taking blame for matters as consequential for human society as plague and subsistence crises" (Jensen 2007, 147).

[5] The term "communal catharsis" is the idea that the pursuit and persecution of witches served as a form of release or purification for the community. It suggests that accusing and punishing witches provided a sense of relief or cleansing for the community, as they were able to vent their frustrations or anxieties onto a targeted group or individual (the witches). This could have been seen as a way to restore communal norms or boundaries (Jensen 2007, 144).

This shows that these witches were able to constitute a threat to both men and women in a "gender-structured economy"[6] (Jensen 2007, 150). So, these women were seen as powerful enough to be conceived as a threat, but also not powerful enough to be able to avoid accusations and being the scapegoat. It can be concluded that witchcraft in the early modern context of local environments in Europe was about power. Part of this power that provoked these feelings of fear towards the figure of the witch can be connected to the power of knowledge and speech. Sharpe (1991) explains how in this period, speech and verbal violence were considered a form of power, particularly in the context of witchcraft accusations, where it was believed that witches could cause harm to others through their verbal actions (by for example spells and tale telling) (Sharpe 1991, 160). He suggests that the connection between power and the spoken word was often attributed to women, as physical violence was considered a male peculiarity, while verbal violence, such as scolding, was seen as quintessentially female and represents one facet of what can be seen as a complex zone of female power (ibid., 160). The power of knowledge mostly manifested itself in women's knowledge in medicine, healing, midwifery, and child-care. The persecution of women as witches is linked to the repression of women as healers, as the male medical profession sought to establish a monopoly over medical care (ibid., 161) to undermine the power of female midwives and healing (Jensen 2007, 158). The position of these female local healers was ambivalent, in appropriate circumstances, the knowledge that they had the power to do good easily fuelled suspicion that they also had the power to do evil (Sharpe 1991, 162).

Another aspect of the feared knowledge of witches comes forth in the characteristics and appearance of women being accused and prosecuted of witchcraft. In Lorenzi's (2005) book on the iconography of witches, he presents the idea that the characteristics of witches can be seen from multiple perspectives, which he refers to as "personas." He suggests two different personas for the image of a witch; the first persona of the witch as a dangerous wicked woman, representing the innate wickedness of women, manifested by the sin of lechery (Lorenzi 2005, 79), and the second persona of the witch being a lady of pleasure, using seductive charms, being an image of beauty possessed by the devil, and a victim of nymphomania (ibid., 79). These characteristics, as described by Lorenzi, shed light on the feared knowledge of witches and how they were perceived. Kimberly Stratton, scholar in the field of religious studies at Columbia University with research interests including ancient

[6] The concept of a "gender-structured economy" refers to a societal structure where gender plays a significant role in organizing power, wealth, and social roles, and women who have some degree of power or independence may be perceived as a threat and thus targeted for accusations of witchcraft (Jensen 2007, 150-151).

magic, argues in her book *"Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World"* (2022) how, in the 'ancient world', the depiction of assertive women as lustful and domineering witches is a common stereotype used to demonize them (Stratton 2022, 3) and connects to the idea of the amount of power these women must radiate to be "credible targets of blame" (Jensen 2007, 147).

This is also where western thought and colonialism come into play. Foreign religions were portrayed as threatening and uncivilized, and these stereotypes have also been used to justify colonial and imperialist policies on the grounds that "primitive" religious practices resemble magic and therefore need to be elevated through rationalist and scientific knowledge brought by Europeans (Stratton 2022, 4). This can be seen in the light of the connection between capitalism and colonialism as argued by Silvia Federici (2004). She discusses how capitalism is inherently committed to racism and sexism as it relies on justifying and mystifying the contradictions of its social relations, such as the promise of freedom versus widespread coercion, and the promise of prosperity versus widespread poverty, by denigrating and exploiting certain groups, including women, colonial subjects, slaves, and immigrants (Federici 2004, 17). She highlights the violence, enslavement, and exploitation that have historically been inflicted on these groups, and the continued gendered and racialized violence in the present day, including the conquest of the female body through reproductive technologies and the feminization of poverty resulting from globalization (ibid., 16-17). By targeting these women, the ruling class was able to suppress forms of knowledge and social practices that were seen as threatening to their power (ibid., 142). This, for example, caused a lot of enslaved women doing housework in western countries being accused of practicing witchcraft, because their 'alternative' ways of tale telling, rituals and traditions were seen as threatening (Stratton 2022).

Another point where witchcraft accusations were commonly directed at, included women who were economically marginalized and socially isolated, such as widows and poor women (Sharpe 1991, 156). According to Walker (2021), these women were isolated as a result of the accusations, either initially or as a consequence, which further alienated them from society (Walker 2021, 136). The fact that unmarried or widowed women had a higher chance of accusation was because of being anomalies in the patriarchal order since they were seen as outside of conventional hierarchies and outside of husbandly control (Sharpe 1991, 156). The stereotypical witch was seen as an inversion of the ideal woman and a sexually dangerous figure who lured men away from the path of righteousness (ibid., 156). This idea of an inversion of the ideal woman can also be connected to ideas about femininity, masculinity,

and sexuality. In her article, Abigail Walker (2021) discusses the witch as a queer icon. She mentions the common figure ‘the bearded witch’, who was seen as genderqueer and monstrous, which suggests that any woman who did not physically conform to social expectations of femininity was seen as this deviant figure (Walker 2021, 144). Being these queer anomalies in society, out of husbandly control, and sexually dangerous evoked fear and provoked accusations of witchcraft. In conclusion, the persecution of witches throughout history was rooted in fear of their perceived power, particularly their knowledge and speech, which challenged traditional gender roles and threatened the dominance of male authority in medicine and other domains and was further fuelled by colonialist and capitalist ideologies that justified the oppression and exploitation of marginalized groups, including women.

Accusations and gossip

Accusations of witchcraft based on gossip were a pervasive phenomenon during the Early Modern period in Europe. These accusations were often directed at women, particularly those from lower social classes, who were accused of using their supposed powers to harm others (Sharpe 1991). The concept of negative power, as developed by Jill Dubisch (1984), provides a useful framework for understanding how these accusations were able to gain traction and how they reinforced gender roles and expectations.

According to Sharpe (1991, 163), In many cases, accusations of witchcraft were seen as being fundamentally in the female sphere, with the whole business of deciding if an individual was a witch or if an individual act constituted witchcraft being left to women.

Dubisch's (1986) concept of negative power is particularly relevant here, as it highlights the power of gossip and social exclusion in shaping social norms and behaviours, specifically in the context of accusations of witchcraft. Negative power refers to a type of power that is used by people who are not in formal positions of authority using gossip to exert control over others to shame or ostracize individuals who do not conform to social norms (Dubisch 1986, 27). In contemporary rural Greece, where Dubisch conducted her research, negative power is often exercised by women, who may not have access to formal power structures but could influence social behaviour through the use of gossip (Dubisch 1986, 58).

The negative power of gossip can be seen as a potent force in societies and played a significant role in the accusations of witches. The use of negative power has the potential to control and oppress people, but it can also be a way for marginalized individuals and groups to resist and challenge dominant social norms. For example, by engaging in gossip,

marginalized individuals may create alternative communities and spaces where they feel more accepted and can assert their identities (Dubisch 1986, 84). However, as Larner emphasizes, accusations of witchcraft were often based on interpersonal conflicts and disputes, rather than any actual evidence of witchcraft or wrongdoing (Larner 1984, 100). This shows how negative power is something people (women) used to accuse other women of witchcraft when in conflict. This arbitrary nature of witch-hunting speaks to the ways in which negative power can be used to perpetuate social hierarchies and reinforce gender roles and expectations.

Federici (2004) also emphasizes and explains the power that gossip holds by highlighting the historical context in which the term "gossip" began to acquire a negative connotation (Federici 2004, 100). She suggests that the changing attitudes towards women and female friendships in England during the early modern period were linked to the stigmatization of gossip. The term "gossip," which originally meant female friend, began to acquire a derogatory connotation during this period, suggesting that the power of women and communal ties were undermined (ibid., 186). This shift in the meaning of the term "gossip" demonstrates the negative perception of female friendships and the attempt to restrict women's social interactions. Furthermore, she suggests that the demonization of women-to-women relations and the suspicion towards female friendships were also reflected in the witch trials. The prosecutors of the witches forced them to denounce each other as accomplices in crime, indicating a breakdown of trust and communal ties among women (ibid., 100). This highlights the power that gossip holds by showing how it was used as a tool to control and undermine women's power and social connections. The negative connotation associated with the term "gossip" was a reflection of the societal attitudes towards women and their role in public life (ibid., 100). In the context of Dubisch (1986), negative power, as exemplified by the use of gossip by women to exert control and influence social behaviour, aligns with Federici's analysis of the historical stigmatization of gossip as a means to undermine women's power and communal ties. Understanding the complex ways in which power operates in society, particularly in relation to gender and social hierarchies, is crucial for understanding the historical and contemporary implications of accusations of witchcraft based on gossip.

Agency and the witch

In feminist theory, agency can be understood as women's self-determination which encompasses various forms of self-definition and self-direction (Abrams 1999, 807). Agency is not limited to individual actions, but also includes collective action aimed at resistance to

subordination or oppression. This understanding of agency takes into account the context of group-based oppressions and recognizes that agency can be directed towards cultural and political targets, in addition to individual ones, emerging through both individual self-reflection and collective action. This perspective expands the traditional liberal analysis of agency and acknowledges the importance of recognizing and valuing agency in marginalized groups and their efforts towards empowerment and social change (Abrams 1999, 807-808).

As already discussed above, the witch can be represented as an assertive, powerful woman. This goes hand in hand with a notion of agency regarding the witch, some scholars have talked about. One important aspect of the witch is the context in which accusations of witchcraft took place. As already discussed before, women were not initially viewed as credible targets for scapegoating until they could be seen as credible allies of Satan. This required women to be seen as capable of collective, organized, and conspiratorial arrangements, and thus having the capacity for secret arrangements with him (Jensen 2007, 147). Women had to be viewed as capable of organization before they could be credited with the same collective evil as other threatening groups (Jensen 2007, 147). This suggests that witchcraft could also be seen as a symbol of female collective action, where these women must have wielded some degree of power (Jensen 2007, 150). This connects well to Purkiss' (2003) idea of being a witch as something women can actively do and practice as a choice, instead of it always being done to them (Purkiss 2003, 145).

The agency that women invested in being a witch as a fantasy allows and allowed them to express and manage otherwise unspeakable fears and desires, witches scripted their own stories (Purkiss 2003), at least in part. From the self-fashioning as a kind of occult businesswoman to self-defence as "a good mother rather than a bad antimother" (ibid., 169). The argument Purkiss (2003) makes is that women themselves heavily invested in the archetype of the witch as a way to express and manage their own fears and desires, specifically related to motherhood and children. The idea of the maternal body, which is both desired and feared as a source of pollution, is central to understanding the witch's magic as a "unseen and infinitely extended aspect of her body which can do harm beyond her apparent bounds" (ibid., 2). The concept of the witch has always been associated with a type of feminine power that challenges conventional norms (Sollee 2017, 56), such as the power of the maternal body. Throughout history, women who held positions of economic privilege, who were intelligent or knowledgeable in medicine or those who were outspoken or sexually active have been demonized and controlled. The idea of female independence and sexual liberation remains threatening because it liberates women from oppressive societal structures

and allows them to obtain power without relying on patriarchal systems (ibid., 56). The accused women used the opportunity of being accused of witchcraft to shape their own identity and create a compromise between their understanding of the world and the hegemonic existing categories. The figure of the witch could be an occasion for female self-fashioning and self-advancement, allowing class boundaries to be crossed for those who otherwise found them impassable (Purkiss 2003, 162).

The concept of agency for the witch has evolved over time, with the witch taking on different meanings in different contexts. In the 1960s and 70s in the US, the witch emerged as a powerful symbol of rebellion and empowerment for women. She was seen as a symbol for the women's movement, representing the struggle against patriarchal oppression and the quest for female autonomy (Sollee 2017, 47). During this period, the witch also became associated with the idea of "an engine of activism" (ibid., 47), as women began to use the image of the witch as a way of mobilizing for social and political change. The witch became a powerful symbol of resistance and a way of challenging established power structures. Then, the witch and witchcraft can be understood as a "means of empowerment" (Hester 1992, 110) for people who were seen as socially 'deviant'. The tradition of witch covens continues to survive in the 21st century, with new activist groups using the figure of the witch as a way of reconceiving political protest. These new covens are radically reclaiming the witch as a potent symbol of rebellion, using her image to challenge the status quo and to promote social justice and equality (Sollee 2017, 54).

In conclusion, the archetype of the witch has been represented as an assertive, powerful woman with agency, capable of collective action and self-fashioning, challenging conventional norms and oppressive systems. The concept of the witch has evolved over time, with the witch symbolizing rebellion, empowerment, and activism, and continuing to be used as a means of empowerment and resistance by marginalized groups in the modern era.

Posthumanism and the cyborg

To conclude this chapter, I would like to make the connection between the figure of the witch and posthumanism and the cyborg (Haraway 1991). To be able to examine and understand the above-mentioned narratives surrounding the figure of the witch about misogyny, racism, and classism, it is relevant to highlight and analyse the ways in which the witch challenges traditional binary oppositions and power structures. Analysing the figure of the witch through a posthumanist cyborg lens, has the potential to offer new insights into the ways in which

power and oppression are inscribed in cultural narratives and practices, to conceptualize the ideas of the figure of the witch being associated with the rejection of patriarchal and capitalist values already discussed in the theories above.

Posthumanism, from a feminist theory perspective, is about challenging the concept of 'the human', the boundaries between human and animal, culture and nature, technology and embodiment and discourse and matter, by analysing dynamics of becoming. The posthuman is a human already entangled with various aspects of the world (e.g., technology, ecology, society, culture) (Barad 2003; Braidotti 2013; Alaimo 2008). In posthumanism the givenness of the categories of 'human' and 'nonhuman' should be questioned by examining the practices that determine, stabilize, and destabilize these differential boundaries (Barad 2003, 808).

Another perspective to how posthumanity can be discussed, is in a more transhumanist way of being where creatures can exist in a state greater than or outside of humanity (Hughes 2015, 235). Hughes (2015) describes these so called 'posthumans' as representations of a "superempowered and radically different humanity" (ibid., 235), who are able to reflect anxieties about authority, race and the limits of democracy (ibid., 235). He talks about the posthuman creature as "enhanced humans" (ibid., 239), [7] these enhanced humans do not rest on the binary opposition between the given and constructed but represent a non-dualistic understanding of the nature-culture interaction (Braidotti 2013, 3). This approach on posthumanism/transhumanism emphasizes the potential transformation or evolution of humanity through advanced technologies, and how posthumans may possess enhanced abilities or characteristics. It focuses on the impacts of these transformations on human nature, society, and culture, and how posthumans may reflect social and political anxieties, while the approach of feminist theorists Barad (2003), Braidotti (2013) and Alaimo (2008) emphasizes challenging and transcending traditional boundaries and categories by the potential transformation or evolution of humanity through advanced technologies.

This way of thinking and understanding the world, can be seen as "an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge, and self-representation. The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming" (Braidotti 2013, 12). Posthumanism is about deconstructing for example ethics, communication, power relations, science, materiality, and

[7] Because Hughes is talking about 'humans' in his approach of posthumanism, I understand his perspective more as transhumanist approach rather than a posthumanist approach, since the idea of 'human enhancement' and the idea of improving/perfecting the human is often described by feminist scholars as the core of transhumanism where posthumanism is more about completely challenging the concept of 'the human' (Braidotti 2013, 2; Górska 2022).

identity. In her article, Stacy Alaimo (2008) defines posthumanism as a perspective that emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds and challenges the traditional human-centeredness of Western thought. She explains that posthumanism calls for a re-evaluation of the boundaries between the human and nonhuman, and the relationships of humans to animals, plants, and machines (Alaimo 2008). She argues that posthumanism offers a way to move beyond the traditional human-centeredness of Western thought and to create a new ethical space that recognizes the agency and interdependence of all beings (ibid., 249). In this way, posthumanism is a way of thinking about the human that takes seriously the ecological and technological dimensions of our embodiment and that does not privilege human over nonhuman or culture over nature.

While Braidotti (2013), Alaimo (2008) and Barad (2003) do not explicitly address a clear 'posthuman subject' as Hughes does, I will link their theories and understanding of posthumanism to the figure of the witch as a posthuman subject. In his article, Hughes (2015), talks about the depiction of 'enhanced humans' or 'the posthuman subject' as "aspiring tyrants or secretive aristocrats manipulating mortal events" (Hughes 2015, 239), who strive for world domination and are represented as a collectivist threat to humanity (ibid., 236). In his chapter, Hughes (2015) discusses this depiction in relation to popular culture and uses the character of Khan Noonien Signh from Star Trek as an example, in the Star Trek universe, he is a genetically engineered human, leader of a group of enhanced supermen and -women who seized control of a part of Earth.

Witches can also be an example of this posthuman subject. If you put these different perspectives on posthumanism in relation to the archetype of the witch, the transhumanist/posthumanist approach of Hughes (2015) represents the negative, malevolent figure of the witch. Witches can be seen as representations of individuals who exist in a state greater than or outside of humanity (Walker 2021, 135). They are often portrayed as "enhanced humans" who possess powers and abilities beyond those of typical humans and use those powers and abilities to manipulate and strive for world domination (Hughes 2015, 239). On the other side, looking at posthumanism through a feminist lens, witches align with the posthuman concept of challenging the boundaries between human and nonhuman, as well as the binary opposition between the given and constructed (Braidotti 2013). They have long been associated with challenging traditional societal norms and pushing boundaries. Here, the figure of the witch is represented as a malevolent, empowered subject.

Witches are also closely connected to the idea of nature and the natural world. In many sources, witches are believed to possess a deep understanding and connection to the natural

world, and are often associated with the earth, plants, and animals (Sollee 2017, 27). This connection aligns with posthumanism's emphasis on the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds, and the importance of recognizing the agency and interdependence of all beings (Alaimo 2008).

Furthermore, witches are often portrayed as challenging the traditional power relations and hierarchies of society. In many historical and cultural contexts, witches were perceived as a threat to the patriarchal power structures of their time (Walker 2021, 131). This representation of witches aligns with posthumanism's focus on deconstructing traditional power relations and promoting alternative schemes of thought and self-representation (Braidotti 2013, 12). The witch can be seen as a symbol of rejection of the human-centric worldview. Through their representation as enhanced humans, their connection to nature and nonhuman beings, and their challenge to traditional power relations, witches associate with the posthumanist focus on deconstructing boundaries, challenging traditional societal norms, and empowering alternative ways of thinking (Braidotti 2013, 12).

In her work "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) Donna Haraway argues that the concept of the ‘cyborg’, a being that is both machine and organism, offers a powerful metaphor for understanding the ways in which technology and biology are increasingly intertwined in contemporary society (Haraway 1991, 161). The cyborg can be understood as a creature of the technological age. One of the key arguments in Haraway's manifesto (1991) is that the cyborg serves as a means of challenging traditional boundaries, such as those between human and animal, machine and organism, and self and other. She suggests that the cyborg is a "creature in a post-gender world" (ibid., 150) that blurs traditional distinctions and subverts traditional hierarchies. In addition, Haraway (1991) says that the cyborg can be used as a tool for feminist and socialist politics, as it offers a way to reject the notion of a ‘natural’ or ‘essential’ identity and instead embrace a fluid, hybrid identity that is not fixed by biology or social norms.

Haraway argues that the concept of the cyborg represents a blurring of the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, the human and the machine. This blurring of boundaries challenges traditional dualisms and hierarchies, such as those between human and animal, mind and body, and self and other (Haraway 1991, 152). “Communications, sciences and biology are constructions of natural-technical objects of knowledge in which the difference between machine and organism is thoroughly blurred; mind, body, and tool are on very intimate terms” (ibid., 165). Here, Haraway suggests that the cyborg can represent a potential

in understanding the ways in which technology and biology are increasingly interweaved in contemporary society, and the way they are used to construct and reinforce social hierarchies.

Haraway's concept of the cyborg can be seen as an early exploration of posthumanism and its potential implications for society and culture. As technology continues to advance, the line between human and machine becomes increasingly blurred, and the cyborg represents a way of thinking about this blurring of boundaries (ibid., 150). The cyborg serves as a symbol for a new kind of identity that is not fixed by biology or social norms, but instead is fluid, hybrid, and open to change. In this sense, the cyborg represents a new way of thinking about what it means to be human in a rapidly changing technological world. It challenges traditional notions of identity and offers a new vision of a posthuman world in which technology and biology are no longer seen as separate and opposing forces but are instead seen as intertwined and complementary.

I will be connecting Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg to the archetype of the witch. This can be done in several ways. Both the cyborg and the witch can be seen as symbols of transgression and subversion, challenging traditional notions of identity, gender, and power (Haraway 1991, 152). Historically, witches were often portrayed as women who transcended traditional gender roles and social norms:

"The witch's connection to a nuanced depiction of gender by challenging the differences between masculinity and femininity by interrogating the spaces between them, and to the themes of monstrosity and posthumanism, further presents the witch as a queer icon. The witch 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, 145).

Witches were seen as powerful, dangerous beings who challenged patriarchal power structures and threatened the status quo (Sollee 2017). This is a parallel to the cyborg, which also represents a challenge to traditional dualisms and hierarchies (Haraway 1991).

In both cases, the cyborg and the witch represent a rejection of traditional ideas about what it means to be human and a subversion of traditional power structures. They both challenge the notion of a 'natural' or 'essential' identity, and instead embrace a fluid, hybrid identity that is not fixed by biology or social norms (Haraway 1991). Furthermore, both the cyborg and the witch can be seen as symbols of the changing relationship between technology

and society. The witch can be understood as a symbol of the way in which technology and knowledge are used to construct and reinforce social hierarchies in the past and present.

In conclusion, the theory of the cyborg and the historical archetype of the witch share several key similarities, including challenging traditional notions of identity, gender, and power, and functioning as a symbol of the changing relationship between technology and society. These connections suggest that the cyborg can be seen as a version of the witch, or that the witch can be seen as a version of the cyborg. A powerful symbol of transgression and subversion.

Chapter two

WITCHES VS. PATRIARCHY: EXPLORING THE BENEVOLENT WITCH IN REDDIT COMMUNITIES

In this chapter I am analysing the Reddit community 'r/WitchesVsPatriarchy', this subreddit describes themselves as: "a woman-centered sub with a witchy twist, aimed at healing, supporting, and uplifting one another through humor and magic. The goal is to at once embrace, and poke fun at, the mystical aspects of femininity that have been previously demonized and/or devalued by the patriarchy." It has 679k members who ask each other for advice, ask questions, share experiences and memes relating to witchcraft and feminist issues. In this thesis this subreddit functions as a representation of the witch as a benevolent figure. It shows how the witch is not solely or simply a creation of patriarchy (Purkiss 2003, 2), and how people also heavily invest in the figure of the witch as a fantasy that allows them to express and manage otherwise unspoken fears and desires (Purkiss 2003). Being a witch is mostly seen as something that is done to women, but it can also be something they actively do and practice themselves (Purkiss 2003, 2). This idea is elaborated in this chapter. I will be discussing the posts and analyse them based on the themes and theories of chapter one: (i) gender and the witch, (ii) fear, knowledge and oppression, (iii) accusations and gossip, (iv) agency and the witch, (v) posthumanism and the cyborg.

Post 1: reclaiming the menopause

In this post on the subreddit we see someone wearing a shirt that says: “In menopause and hotter than ever”. In the caption they say: “Does the *feeling* of being burned alive fit here? I’m trying to raise awareness about the struggles of menopause and break the stigma associated with it. Who’s with me?” (see figure 1).

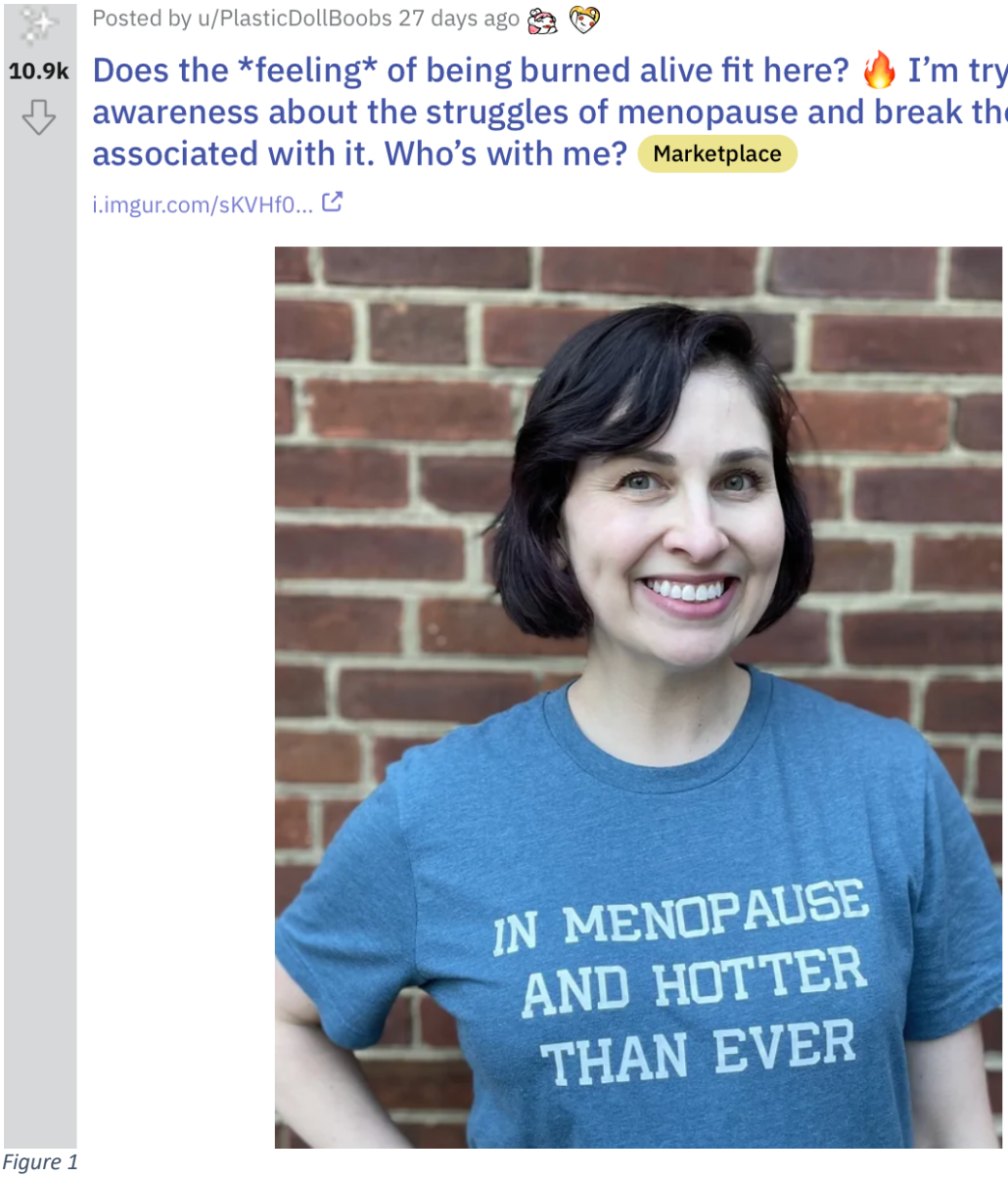

Figure 1

With this post this person is asserting their agency as someone in menopause. By wearing the shirt and posting the picture with the caption, they are challenging the stigma associated with menopause and highlighting the struggles that people in menopause face. In doing so, they are following in the tradition of the witch as a symbol of female agency, self-fashioning, and empowerment (Purkiss 2003, 162). The author their statement that they feel "burned alive" connects to the idea of the witch as a symbol of female power but also to the historic practice of burning witches at the stake.

Menopause can be a difficult time for people, both physically and emotionally, and the author their statement suggests that they are experiencing some of the negative effects of this transition. However, by asserting their agency and reclaiming the image of the "hot" menopausal person, they are also challenging the idea that menopause is a time of decline and loss of power, which is a prime example of the inequalities in cultural approaches to ageing between men and women (Chollet 2022). For women, in this kind of dominant patriarchal discourse, ageing means losing your fertility, your seductive power, and your role as the care provider for a husband and children, while for men it represents successfulness, power and getting more attractive and handsome (ibid., 156). Her statement highlights the fact that menopause is often stigmatized and seen as a negative aspect of the ageing process for women. This connects to the idea of the witch as a figure who challenges established power structures and pushes for a more just and equitable society (Sollee 2017). By challenging the stigma around menopause, the author is asserting their agency and fighting for the rights of people who are experiencing this transition in life. Overall, the post can be seen as an example of the continued relevance of the figure of the witch as a symbol of female agency and empowerment (Purkiss 2003; Sollee 2017). By reclaiming the image of the "hot" menopausal person, the author in the picture is challenging the patriarchal norms that seek to silence and marginalize people with uteruses as they age. In doing so, they are asserting their own agency and fighting for the rights of all people in menopause to be seen as powerful and capable at any age.

Post 2: the hard-core divine feminine

On the subreddit ‘r/WitchesVsPatriarchy’ someone posted: ‘I think the hard-core divine feminine rhetoric is trash’. In the post, the author expresses concerns about the exclusionary and potentially harmful rhetoric surrounding the concept of the ‘divine feminine’ (see figure

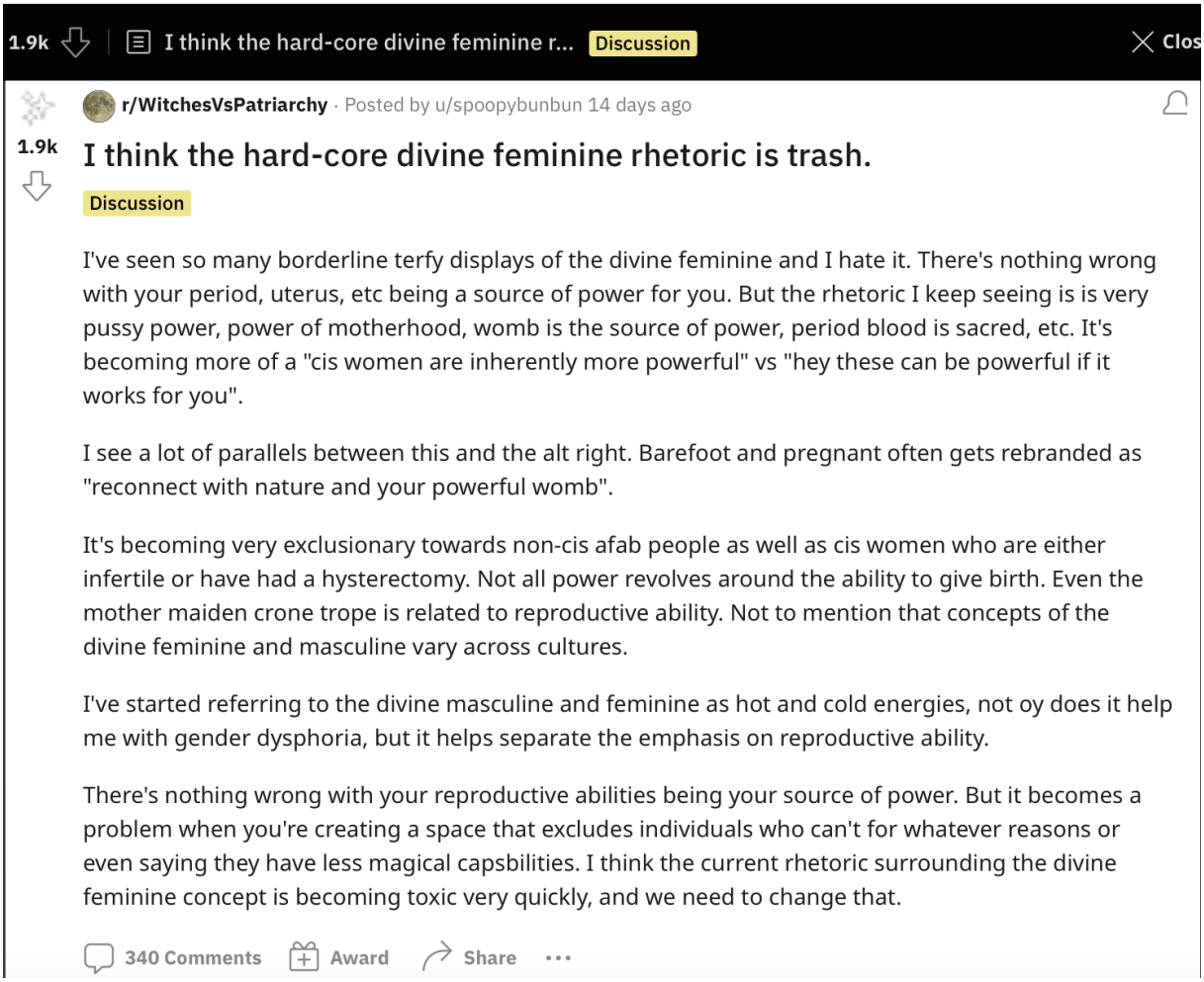

Figure 2

The post argues that the current rhetoric surrounding the divine feminine is becoming exclusionary towards non-cis AFAB (assigned female at birth) people, as well as cis women who are either infertile or have had a hysterectomy, indicating that the emphasis on reproductive ability as a source of power can be problematic. This post on ‘r/WitchesVsPatriarchy’ highlights the importance of recognizing the diversity of experiences and sources of power among individuals who do not identify with the concept of the ‘divine feminine’. It also points to the historical tendency to demonize and oppress women, particularly those who do not conform to traditional gender roles of women as childbearing caregivers and homemakers.

The notion of the ‘ideal woman’ (Sharpe 1991, 156), the married woman in conventional hierarchies under husbandly control, can be connected to this idea of the ‘divine feminine’ the author of the post is talking about: the menstruating, childbearing woman. Sharpe (1991) argues that the witch is the opposite of this ‘ideal woman’, she is an inversion of it. Walker (2021) discusses similar narratives surrounding this inversion of the ideal woman in relation to ideas about femininity, masculinity, and sexuality, where she proposes the witch as a queer icon. The witch is presented as a queer icon by her association with a complex portrayal of gender, by challenging the differences between masculinity and femininity and by interrogating the spaces between them, questioning the boundaries between masculinity and femininity (Walker 2021, 145). The post's critique of the rhetoric surrounding the “divine feminine” can be seen as a challenge to the idea of the 'ideal woman' by Walker (2021), which is similarly constructed around the concept of femininity that is tied to reproductive ability. The post's call for a more inclusive understanding of power that does not rely solely on reproductive ability can be seen as a way to question and challenge the boundaries between masculinity and femininity and move towards a more complex and inclusive understanding of gender and power. The author does this by proposing an alternative understanding of the divine masculine and feminine as hot and cold energies, which does not rely on reproductive ability and moves away from a narrow understanding of gender and power as solely related to reproductive ability. By rejecting the narrow understanding of the divine feminine and proposing an alternative understanding of the divine masculine and feminine, the post is calling for a more complex and inclusive understanding of gender and power. The idea of the divine masculine and feminine as hot and cold energies can be seen as a way of creating a compromise between the individual's understanding of the world and existing categories, as discussed by Purkiss (2003, 162). The post argues that this separation of emphasis on reproductive ability can help with gender dysphoria and create a more inclusive space that does not exclude individuals who cannot or do not want to rely on patriarchal systems of power.

The criticism of the "divine feminine" the author of the post expresses, can be analysed in light of Sollee’s (2017) argument relating to the agency of the witch. The concept of the witch and the power of the maternal body has been used to represent feminine power that challenges conventional norms (Sollee 2017, 56). Sollee (2017) argues that throughout history, the concept of the witch has been associated with a type of feminine power that challenges conventional norms, such as the power of the maternal body. This power has been used to demonize and control women who were seen as a threat to the existing patriarchal

structures, particularly those who held positions of economic privilege, were intelligent or knowledgeable in medicine, or were outspoken or sexually active. This exactly indicates what the author is criticizing. The idea of the "divine feminine" as a source of power that focusses on the reproductive abilities of women can be seen as a continuation of a trend, reinforcing gender essentialism, and excluding those who do not fit within its narrow definitions. The idea of the "divine feminine" can be connected to the concept of the witch. Both can be seen as a way for women to express and manage their own fears and desires related to motherhood, children, and society (Purkiss 2003, 2). The witch could both harm and heal, and this allowed women to explore their own feelings about motherhood and the maternal body (Purkiss 2003, 2). However, as the author of the post notes, this can become problematic when it excludes those who do not identify with or have access to these experiences. The post's critique of the "divine feminine" emphasizes the significance of critically analysing concepts that claim to celebrate and empower women while at the same time potentially reinforcing harmful gender norms and excluding people.

Post 3: the image of the figure of the witch

This post (see figure 3) represents the idea that the stereotypical image of witches as

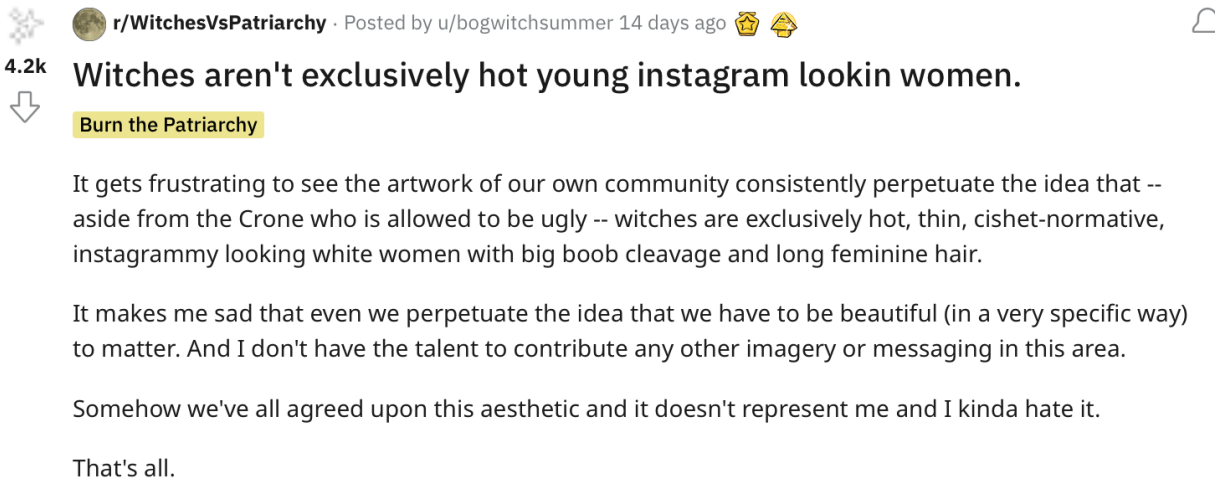

Figure 3

exclusively beautiful and sexually appealing women perpetuates harmful and limiting standards of beauty and femininity. The author of this post expresses frustration with the lack of diversity in the imagery of witches, which reinforces the idea that only a certain type of human can be a witch or can be seen as powerful and worthy of attention. This narrow representation of witches is related to the historical persona of the witch as a sexually dangerous and assertive woman (Sharpe 1991) and connects to how witchcraft accusations were often used as a tool of oppression against women who were seen as deviant or out of place in society. Which were, in the times of the witch-hunts in the 17th century, mostly assertive, lustful, openly sexually active women and being an image of beauty (Sollee 2017; Stratton 2022; Lorenzi 2005). A parallel can be seen to the “hot young instagram lookin women”, the author is describing. This woman represents stereotypical western and modern beauty standards of femininity with her “big boob cleavage”, “long feminine hair”, being thin, white and cishet-normative. She is beautiful in “a very specific way”. Anyone not identifying with this normative idea of femininity (like the author of this post), is being excluded from this imagery of witches and can feel like a deviant (Sollee 2017).

This post is challenging normative ideas about beauty and presenting a more nuanced view of femininity, which can be connected to the idea of the witch as a queer icon, for example in the image of ‘the bearded witch’ (Walker 2021, 144). Using Lorenzi's (2005) two personas theory, the post can be analysed in terms of how it relates to the second persona of the witch as a lady of pleasure and as an image of beauty possessed by the devil. The Redditpost expresses frustration with the narrow and limited portrayal of witches as

“exclusively hot, thin, cishet-normative, young, instagrammy lookin white women with big boob cleavage and long feminine hair”. This stereotype of the witch as a seductive and sexually alluring woman aligns with Lorenzi's second persona of the witch as a lady of pleasure, who uses her beauty and charm to lure men into sinful acts (Lorenzi 2005, 79).

The post illustrates how the persona/image of the witch as a ‘lady of pleasure’ and as a stereotypical attractive, sexually alluring figure has been translated to the portrayal of contemporary witches as “hot” and “young”. The ambiguity in the archetype of the witch emerges here. The contemporary image of the witch as hot, feminine, young etc. is used to reclaim femininity and beauty while identifying as a witch and go against the stereotypes of the witch as ugly, monstruous, and old. Meanwhile, however the author criticizes this very image and encourages a more diverse and inclusive representation of witches that goes beyond narrow beauty standards and rejects harmful beauty standards and gender norms.

Post 4: are women human?

Figure 4

This post on the Reddit page ‘r/WitchesVsPatriarchy’ says "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people" (see figure 4) and can be analysed in the context of posthumanism and the cyborg. Posthumanism challenges the boundaries between human and nonhuman, culture and nature, technology and embodiment, and discourse and matter. It is about deconstructing ethics, communication, power relations, science, materiality, and identity (Barad 2003; Braidotti 2013; Alaimo 2008; Hughes 2015). The figure of the witch challenges traditional binary oppositions and power structures and can be seen as a posthuman subject.

This Reddit post asserts that women are human, and the use of the ironic "we are??" in the caption suggests that some individuals have been considered as fully human (i.e., men),

while others are not (i.e., women). While the post does not explicitly address the idea of the 'nonhuman', it implies that only certain types of humans are recognized as fully human, which raises the question of what it means to be human and who can be considered as human. This emphasises posthumanism's focus on the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds and the rejection of traditional human-centeredness (Alaimo 2008). By ironically saying women should be recognised as people, the post emphasizes the agency and interdependence of all beings and challenges the patriarchal power structures of society (Alaimo 2008, 249). The statement challenges a patriarchal power structure by asserting that women should be recognized as equal to men in their humanity and worth. It suggests that the idea of women as people is so basic and fundamental that it should not even be considered "radical", and that without this radical notion not all beings have agency and interdependence.

The statement "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people", challenges the essentialist notion that women are fundamentally different from men and therefore should be treated as second-class citizens or even seen as not human. By asserting that women are people, the statement emphasizes that women share a common humanity with men, and therefore should be afforded the same rights and opportunities. This post speaks to broader perspectives of feminist scholars challenging the essentialist idea that there is a single, fixed definition of what it means to be a woman and that there is no "essential unity" (Haraway 1991, 155). The statement asserts that women should be defined not by their biology, but by their humanity. This undermines essentialist arguments that there is a single fixed definition of womanhood and that all women share the same experiences simply because they are biologically female. By emphasizing that women are people, the statement acknowledges the diversity and complexity of women's experiences, identities, and perspectives. The statement "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people" acknowledges this complexity by highlighting the importance of recognizing women's humanity as a fundamental aspect of feminist thought.

Another important aspect of this post to analyse, is irony. The phrase "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people" is used ironically,[8] because it expresses a belief that

[8] Irony is when someone uses words or language that usually convey the opposite meaning of what they actually intend to express, often to create humor or emphasize a point (Oxford English Dictionary 2023, s.v. "irony"). According to Donna Haraway, in feminist thinking, instead of trying to find a resolution to a point, irony embraces the tension and complexity of contradictions, allowing them to coexist without necessarily seeking resolution or reconciliation (Haraway 1991, 149). It's about embracing the tension of holding together incompatible elements because both, or all, of them are necessary and true. Irony is not only about humor and playfulness, but also a rhetorical strategy and a political method within socialist-feminism (ibid.). At the heart of Haraway's "ironic faith" and "blasphemy" lies the image of the cyborg. The cyborg represents a commitment to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity (ibid., 151).

should be self-evident, but historically has not been treated as such. Women have been denied basic human rights and treated as inferior to men, so by stating that feminism is the radical notion that women are people, the phrase is pointing out that it is radical and revolutionary to believe that women are equal to men and deserve the same rights and opportunities. The statement highlights the absurdity that women have had to fight for something that should be obvious: that they are human beings and deserve to be treated as such. At the same time, it is not solely ironic because it also conveys a genuine belief in the importance of feminism and women's rights. In this post, the use of irony is meant to highlight the injustice and absurdity of the situation, but also does not undermine the importance of the message.

Post 5: betraying the patriarchy

166

I betrayed the patriarchy when I embraced my gender identity. Maybe it's a small gesture, but tonight, I gave it a poke in the eye by dressing as a witch. I think I'm just getting warmed up though.

Selfie Sorcery

Figure 5

From the perspective of Purkiss (2003) her theories on magic and the identity of the witch, this post and photo suggest that the person is using witchcraft and witch identity to challenge the patriarchal system that oppresses them (see figure 5). By embracing their gender identity and dressing up as a witch, they are expressing their individuality and breaking down traditional gender roles that have been imposed by society. The post implies that the act of dressing as a witch is a form of resistance or betrayal against the patriarchy. By wearing the witch's attire, the author is adopting an identity that has historically been associated with subversion and rebellion against oppressive power structures (Sollee 2017). This identity also

represents a crossing of boundaries, which could be interpreted as a rejection of the rigid social hierarchy that patriarchy perpetuates (Walker 2021).

It is important that there is a distinction between identifying as a witch and using the figure of the witch as a gender identity. Identifying as a witch typically refers to someone who practices or believes in witchcraft as a form of spirituality or magic. This can encompass a wide range of beliefs, practices, and traditions, and does not necessarily have anything to do with gender identity or expression. On the other hand, using the figure of the witch as a gender identity is a specific way of feeling and internal sense. Using the witch as a gender identity can be seen as a form of non-conformity to traditional gender standards (e.g., man, woman, non-binary) and a way of asserting one's individuality and autonomy. The author of this post appears to be using the witch as a representation of their gender identity, possibly in conjunction with their identification as a witch, as suggested by their clothing.

This post and photo suggest that the person is using the gender identity of the witch and magic as a means of self-advancement and empowerment. By embracing their individuality and finding hope in the supernatural and its discourses as an understanding of the world (Purkiss 2003, 162), they are challenging the patriarchal system. The post shows a clear assertion of agency by the author in embracing their gender identity as a witch and can be seen as a reclaiming of power and as a defiance of oppression. The witch has historically been associated with subversion, rebellion, and power (Sollee 2017; Jensen 2007) and by adopting this identity, individuals can reclaim these associations as a means of asserting their agency and individuality and can be seen as a means of self-fashioning and self-expression (Purkiss 2003), as well as a way of reclaiming the powerful symbol of the witch as a means of empowerment (Hester 1992, 110). By embracing their identity as a witch, the author is connecting themselves to a long history of women and other social deviant people who have wielded some degree of power and agency through their association with the figure of the witch. Therefore this post can be seen in relation to the idea of the witch as a symbol of female collective action and power (Jensen 2007) and as a means of self-advancement and as a way of crossing constructed boundaries regarding, for example, gender (Purkiss 2003).

Furthermore, the post represents an expression of the evolving concept of the witch and its continued relevance in contemporary society. In the 60s and 70s, the witch emerged as a powerful symbol of rebellion and empowerment for women, and, today, the tradition of witch covens continues to survive, with new activist groups using the archetype of the witch as a way of reconceiving political protest (Sollee 2017). The author their use of the figure of the witch as a symbol of rebellion and resistance against patriarchal oppression aligns with the

idea of the witch as an engine of activism (ibid., 47). This post can be seen as an expression of agency and empowerment in the face of judgment and condemnation for practicing witchcraft, which is a part of the larger history and tradition of women being accused of witchcraft and the figure of the witch being used as a symbol of rebellion and empowerment.

By reclaiming the witch as a potent symbol of rebellion and as a gender identity, the author is challenging the status quo and promoting social justice and equality, by identifying themselves with a historically oppressed group and rejecting the oppressive system that has sought to silence and control them. Concluding, the post can be interpreted as a powerful expression of agency, self-fashioning, and empowerment, and a means of challenging established power structures.

Chapter three

HILLARY FOR PRISON: EXPLORING THE MALEVOLENT WITCH IN REDDIT COMMUNITIES

In this chapter I am analysing the Reddit community 'r/HillaryforPrison', this subreddit describes that they are: "for everyone who wants to put Crooked Hillary IN FEDERAL PRISON WHERE SHE BELONGS. It's the largest from our series of "For Prison" subreddits. Join them both and post your incriminating evidence to expose these criminals." It has 58.8k members who post conspiracy theories, news and hate towards, in particular Hillary Clinton, but also other women in politics in the US. In this thesis this subreddit functions as a representation of the witch as a malevolent figure.

This subreddit represents how the witch can be seen as "A symbol of everything that is dark about the past and woman" (Purkiss 1996, 2). Women with power have been called out as witches for centuries to undermine, malign and ridicule them. The witch is "the bogey of Western society's infancy […]. She also represents the dark forces of unreason which may return at any moment to menace civilisation" (Purkiss 1996, 277). This subreddit shows how the word "witch" has been used to insult and demean women, particularly women in politics, often in an attempt to undermine their authority and diminish their power. I will be discussing the posts and analyse them based on the themes and theories of chapter one: (i) gender and the witch, (ii) fear, knowledge and oppression, (iii) accusations and gossip, (iv) agency and the witch, (v) posthumanism and the cyborg.

Post 1: the witch is insane

Figure 6

This Reddit post on 'r/HillaryForPrison' features street art of a flying monkey, referencing to the 'winged monkey' from The Wizard of Oz, who is holding a sign that says "Hillary 2016". The person posting this, captions the picture of the street art with the statement "a vote for the witch is a vote for insanity". The comparison to the Wicked Witch of the West and her flying monkeys from "The Wizard of Oz" implies that Clinton is a villain who should be defeated, similar to how the wicked witch was ultimately defeated in the story. By associating Clinton with a character known for being evil and defeated, the author is attempting to sway others to their point of view and persuade them not to vote for her. The post's use of the flying monkey reinforces the stereotype of the witch as a dangerous, wicked woman (Lorenzi 2005, 79) and

can be connected to the theme of witches and gender. This stereotype of the witch as a dangerous, wicked woman, is often used to demonize assertive women, as discussed by Stratton (2022, 3), and is linked to the idea that women must radiate power to be credible targets of blame (Jensen 2007). In Clinton's case, she indeed could be seen as a woman with power, being a female politician and the first female nominee for president in the 2016 presidential elections (and almost winning those elections). The post's portrayal of Hillary Clinton as a witch in the caption and in connecting her to the image of the winged monkey, suggests that she is a threatening person that needs to be controlled and is used as a scapegoat to deflect blame, as discussed in Jensen's conflict-strategic persecution and scapegoat perspectives (Jensen 2007). The post's association of Clinton with the figure of the witch shows that she holds some degree of power and therefore poses a threat to those in power (Jensen 2007). By using the term "witch" in this context, the post and comment suggest that Clinton is not just a political opponent, but an enemy to be feared and loathed.

The use of the word "insanity" in this context seems to be a strong and negative term used to discredit Hillary Clinton as a political candidate. The term "insanity" has been used conversationally to describe irrational, abnormal behaviour (Oxford English Dictionary 2023, s.v. "insane") (and could be seen as derogatory and stigmatizing towards people who experience mental health issues). The use of this word can be analysed through the lens of fear, knowledge, and oppression. By using this word, the author is suggesting that supporting Hillary Clinton is irrational or even crazy, implying that anyone who would vote for her lacks sound judgment or is disconnected from reality. According to Stratton (2022), the association between witches and irrationality is a result of contemporary beliefs that view magic as irrational. This belief has played a significant role in justifying colonial and imperialist policies by portraying "primitive" religious practices as magical and in need of rational, scientific knowledge brought by Europeans (Stratton 2022, 3-4). This illustrates how language and discourse have been used to establish power imbalances and legitimize the dominance of certain groups over others. Although it should be noted that Hillary Clinton is a highly privileged woman, using the term "insanity" to describe Hillary Clinton and her supporters can be seen as an example of language and discourse being utilized to marginalize and stigmatize specific individuals or groups, because it questions her competence as a woman in politics.

Post 2: crooked Hillary!

Figure 7

This cartoon is a political caricature that depicts Donald Trump as a hero figure and Hillary Clinton as a villain, specifically as a witch. The use of caricature exaggerates the physical features of the characters, emphasizing Trump's strength and Clinton's alleged dishonesty, symbolized by her witch-like appearance. The eagle carrying Trump implies strength, freedom, and patriotism, while Clinton's broomstick suggests that she is a stereotype of a witch, which can imply malice, deceit, and evil. The speech bubble that reads "Crooked Hillary!" reinforces Trump's branding of Clinton as a dishonest politician and a threat to the country. The cartoon seems to support Trump's campaign by portraying him as the saviour who will "ditch the witch" and rid the country of a corrupt politician.

In analysing this cartoon through the lens of gender in relation to the witch, it is clear that the caricature of Hillary as a witch plays into the longstanding tradition of demonizing powerful women (Jensen 2007, 150). Hillary is depicted with green skin, a pointy hat, and witchy clothing, looking back at Trump with an angry face and her fist in the air. This persona aligns with one of Lorenzi's (2005) personas of the witch as a dangerous, wicked woman representing the innate wickedness of women (Lorenzi 2005, 79). This persona represents

how powerful women were the most likely targets of persecution, as they were seen as credible candidates for accepting blame or taking credit for matters that affected society (Jensen 2007).

In this cartoon, the stereotypical image of the witch plays an important role in addition to Lorenzi's (2006) personas discussed in relation to fear, knowledge, and oppression. The stereotypical image of the witch has become one of the most iconic and recognizable figures in Western popular culture. The cackling, ugly hag with green skin and pointed hat flying on a broomstick through the night air is a visual representation of the centuries-old folklore, superstitions, and cultural iconography (Gray 2015, 163). However, this image has a darker origin as it was used to encourage the persecution and oppression of women during the Renaissance. One of the most common characteristics of witches in their trials and interrogations and also seen in this cartoon, is their ability to fly, which inspired great fear among the superstitious. The broomstick represents a phallic shape, so the image of the witch straddling a broomstick, came to signify a woman's use of male power to transcend the limitations of the physical and, thus, female realm (Ibid., 165). This brings the feminine into the masculine domain, which can be connected to Hillary Clinton, a woman in the masculine domain by being the first female nominee for president in the US. The specific clothing that is associated with witches was not developed during the actual time period of the witch craze, but rather came about later as these images became part of folklore and fairy tales. The idea of witches wearing dark, dirty, and ragged clothing, as seen on Hillary in the cartoon, further reinforced the notion that they were linked to evil and destruction, as black has historically been associated with death (Ibid., 165). In conclusion, this cartoon reinforces gendered power dynamics and the idea of demonizing powerful women, by portraying Trump as a powerful figure while depicting Hillary as a corrupt and morally depraved "crooked" witch.

Post 3: where is Dorothy when you need her?!?

Figure 8

This post is a meme that uses the imagery of the Wicked Witch of the West from the movie "The Wizard of Oz" to criticize four prominent female politicians - Nancy Pelosi, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Hillary Clinton, and Kamala Harris. The text above the images implies that these women are envious of people's freedom and suggests that they are witches.

The colour green, as well as the association of green with envy and witches, plays a significant role in this meme. The Wicked Witch of the West is depicted with green skin, and the post refers to the four politicians as suffering from "green with envy." In her essay, Gray (2015) discusses the historical association between the colour green and supernatural or nonhuman entities. She says the true origin remains a mystery, but she proposes a few

possibilities looking at the meanings of the green colour through history. During medieval morality plays, green was associated with the evil and used to signify the presence of demons and devils. As a result, actors were discouraged from wearing green on stage because it was thought to bring bad luck (Gray 2015, 169). Nonhuman creatures like goblins and aliens are also commonly depicted with green skin and lizard-like features, adding to the colour's association with the supernatural (ibid., 169). Gray (2015) then goes on to explain that the use of flying ointment, a substance associated with witchcraft, provides the strongest link between green skin and witches. The ointment was made from green herbs and was reported to be greenish in colour by those who were convicted of witchcraft in 1681. If the ointment was applied all over the body, it could give the user a greenish hue, potentially contributing to the association between witches and green skin (ibid., 170). This connection between the colour green and envy, as well as with witches, reinforces the Otherness of the four female politicians and reinforces the negative stereotype of witches.

The post seems to be utilizing the stereotype of the witch as an Other (Stratton 2022, 3), a figure who is seen as illegitimate and dangerous. This Otherness is projected onto the four female politicians, who are being labelled as "wicked witches" and accused of being envious of people's freedom. This accusation is reminiscent of the false accusations of witchcraft in the past, which were often rooted in envy, revenge, or hatred towards people who were perceived as different or outside of conventional hierarchies (Sharpe 1991, 156).

Furthermore, the post may also be tapping into the stereotype of assertive women being seen as anomalies in the patriarchal order (Sharpe 1991, 156), as the four politicians are all women who hold positions of power and influence. By labelling them as "wicked witches," the post is attempting to marginalize and demonize these women, portraying them as outside of conventional hierarchies and therefore illegitimate.

This post on the ‘r/HillaryForPrison’ subreddit could be analysed in light of the theories of Otherness, illegitimacy, and danger associated with magic, witchcraft and the colour green. The use of the image of the Wicked Witch of the West, along with the green faces of four prominent Democratic politicians, suggests an attempt to marginalize and demonize these individuals, painting them as Other and dangerous.

Post 4: this witch has the Kuru

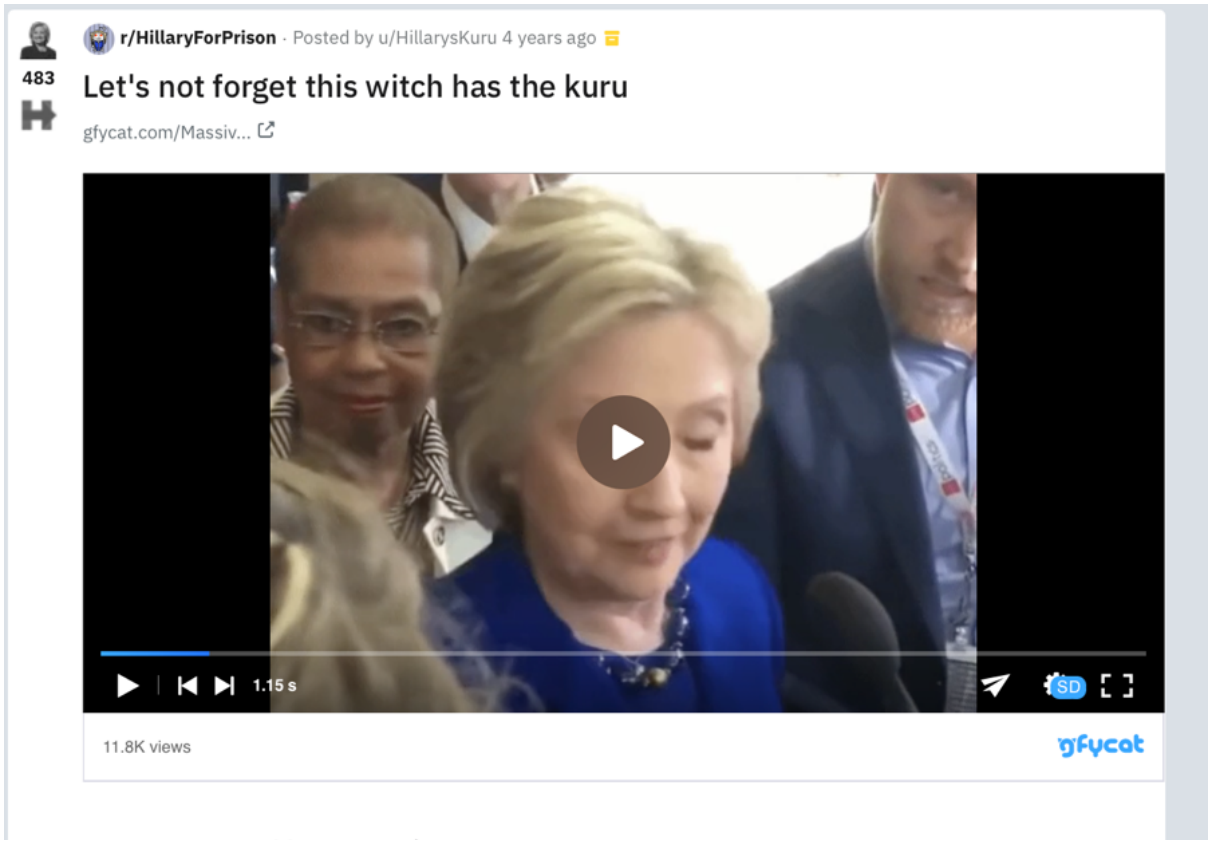

Figure 9

https://www.reddit.com/r/HillaryForPrison/comments/a9o6f7/lets_not_forget_this_witch_has_the_kuru/

In this video we see Hillary Clinton giving an interview where she appears to be having unusual head movements, shaking, and rolling her eyes. It is important to note that it is highly questionable whether this video is a genuine display of her behaviour. The video is likely a deepfake or edited to emphasize her movements, which can distort the viewers' perception of her behaviour. Furthermore, this post claims that Clinton suffers from Kuru[9], which is associated with the body tremors and unusual movements, as seen in the video.

The concept of cannibalism has long been associated with the image of the witch, particularly through theological and legal treatises, judicial trials, pastoral and moralizing literature, and folkloric tales, as well as visual images. During the early sixteenth century, allusions to the cannibalism of witches were linked to fears of moral disorder, which were based on the perception of female sexuality as aggressive (Zika 1997, 78). The post uses the term "witch" in a derogatory way, suggesting that Hillary Clinton is somehow nefarious or evil, which is used to demonize her and create a sense of fear or mistrust around her image.

[9] A rare and fatal disorder caused by cannibalism (Wikipedia, n.d., s.v. “Kuru (disease)”)

Although the author of this post is anonymous and their gender is unknown, it might be possible the author is using the concept of negative power as discussed in relation to accusations and gossip regarding witchcraft. Negative power is a type of power that is not based on formal authority but rather on the ability to use gossip, shame, or ostracism to control others, mostly used by women because they did not hold positions of power (Dubisch 1986, 58). During the Early Modern witch-hunts, the use of negative power was a potent force in society and perpetuated social hierarchies and reinforced gender roles and expectations (Larner 1984, 100). Understanding the complex ways in which power operates in society, particularly in relation to gender and social hierarchies, is important to highlight that the historical and contemporary implications of accusations of witchcraft were based on gossip. The author of this post is clearly trying to shame Hillary Clinton by claiming that she has this disease related to cannibalism. It is unknown if the person posting on the subreddit has a formal position of power or not and is using the idea of negative power. The question remains if we see the concept of negative power here, but it is clear the author of this post is using spreading (incorrect) information as a form of power. This to express their frustration and fears towards Hillary Clinton being the first female nominee for the presidential elections in the US, which does not conform to social norms and gender expectations (Dubisch 1986, 27), where women should not have so much power as Clinton does.

Post 5: the monsters among us

Figure 10

This post contains a conspiracy theory about Hillary Clinton and claims the existence of a video of Clinton murdering a child and drinking her blood. The language used in the post, including the use of all-caps and multiple exclamation marks, suggests a tone of alarm and urgency, attempting to grab the reader's attention and provoke an emotional response. Additionally, the use of the phrase "monsters among us" further emphasizes the idea that Clinton and others like her are not just individuals with whom the author disagrees but are instead monstrous and evil. This connects with themes of fear and frustration as seen in the theme fear, knowledge and oppression in the first chapter of this thesis. Women who were accused of being witches were often perceived as a threat to both men and women in a society where there are clear gender roles and expectations (Jensen 2007, 150). This suggests that the

power and influence of witches were perceived as significant enough to challenge the gendered power dynamics in society. This could be interpreted as a threat to the established social order, where men held more power and women were expected to conform to specific roles and behaviours. It might be this narrative that evokes the fear and frustration the author of this post is clearly experiencing by for example saying how watching the video “caused grown men to become extremely sick” and how “many needed to seek out psychological help after viewing it”. The fear and frustration can be a result of a challenge to the established social order and power dynamics. The perceived threat of a powerful woman evokes a sense of uncertainty and instability, leading to emotional distress.

In this post, Hillary Clinton is claimed to practice cannibalism, which ties in with an important portrayal of witches. Witches have long been associated with cannibalism. Cannibalism was often used as a metaphor for otherness in European cultures, particularly in reference to non-civilized societies. During the early modern period, the idea of cannibalism was associated with the image of the malefic witch. This association helped to further demonize the image of the witch and create a sense of fear and threat around her supposed practices of cannibalism (Zika 1997, 78). The focus of the witch's cannibalistic violence shifted from general victims to specifically targeting innocent children, who were seen as powerful religious symbols within the Christian psyche (Zika 1997, 79). As the witch became increasingly feminized and demonized, she was portrayed as a savage figure and an evil mother who killed and ate young children. Accounts of cannibalism were common in literary treatises on witchcraft and were also given as evidence in witch trials, where witches were accused of sucking human blood, cutting up and cooking human flesh, and eating young children during their sabbath (Zika 1997, 78), just like the post about Hillary Clinton describes. The shift in focus from general victims to children parallels the evolution of the witch's image from the sexually alert, and seductive witch to the post-menopausal, evil mother with sagging and dried up breasts, where the evil mother became associated with murderous infanticide (ibid., 99). And can be connected to the idea of the older woman, often called out for her age and the ugliness that is associated with ageing women (Chollet 2022, 156) which Hillary Clinton represents.

The depiction of Hillary Clinton as a monstrous and cannibalistic witch has been used by some communities as a means of dehumanizing her and justifying violence or oppression against her. They claim that she is not human (but a “witch”, a “monster”, a “soulless demon”) and use this as a reason she should be “hung by the neck until dead”. By reducing Clinton to a non-human or subhuman figure, the authors reject her humanity and agency.

However, from a feminist posthumanist perspective (Braidotti 2013; Alaimo 2008; Barad 2003), we can embrace the archetype of the witch as a symbol of empowerment and resistance against oppressive structures. The more that Clinton is depicted as inhuman or monstrous, the more power she gains as a posthumanist figure that challenges traditional notions of gender and binaries. Rather than reducing Clinton to a non-human or subhuman figure, we can re-appropriate the idea of the witch as a posthumanist figure that breaks down traditional boundaries and norms (Haraway 1991; Alaimo 2008). In this way, we can challenge the very hierarchies that the posthumanist strand of thought seeks to dismantle. By embracing the witch as a posthumanist figure, we can also suggest that there is power in re-appropriating the idea of the "other" as a means of resistance and empowerment. As such, the more that Clinton is depicted as inhuman or monstrous, the more she becomes a symbol of resistance against traditional power structures.

Chapter four

HEXED IDENTITIES: NAVIGATING THE COMPLEXITY OF THE WITCH ARCHETYPE IN ONLINE DISCOURSE

In this chapter I will be analysing the patterns, similarities, and differences of the analyses of chapters two and three. I will do so again on the basis of the five themes of chapter one: (i) gender and the witch, (ii) fear, knowledge and oppression, (iii) accusations and gossip, (iv) agency and the witch, (v) posthumanism and the cyborg.

Gender and the witch

The analysis of the posts on the subreddit 'r/HillaryForPrison' explores the stereotype of the witch as a dangerous and wicked woman. Although Reddit is an anonymous platform, most of the authors of the posts on the subreddit 'r/HillaryForPrison' can be identified as Trump supporters (Hillary Clinton's opponent during the 2016 Presidential Elections in the US). By using this stereotype of women as dangerous wicked witches, the authors of the posts show how this construction of women can be used as a strategy to reinforce dominance over women in a system of male supremacy (Hester 1992, 2). In contrast, the analyses in chapter 2 on the subreddit 'r/WitchesVsPatriarchy' focuses on gender in relation to the witch as a queer icon who challenges traditional notions of gender by blurring the boundaries between masculinity and femininity (Walker 2021, 145). They critique ideas of traditional gender norms and the idea of the "ideal woman" (Sharpe 1991, 156) and propose a more inclusive understanding of power that, for example, that does not rely solely on reproductive ability. The posts offer a way to move beyond a narrow and binary understanding of gender and power. While both analyses touch on the intersection of gender and witchcraft, the first analysis of the subreddit 'r/HillaryForPrison' emphasizes the negative consequences of the witch stereotype for women with power and confirms the gendered nature of witch hunts (Hester 1992), while the analysis of chapter 2 of the subreddit 'r/WitchesVsPatriarchy' focuses on the witch as a symbol of gender fluidity and inclusivity and even as the witch as a gender identity itself. This could be connected to the idea of witch-hunts not being specifically gendered, but more targeted towards generally social deviant people (Larner 1984, 99).

The depiction of witches as both malevolent and benevolent figures can challenge traditional gender norms that limit women to narrow roles. The portrayal of witches as powerful, assertive, and capable of both good and evil disrupts the dichotomous view of women as either pure and nurturing or evil and dangerous. This portrayal of witches

challenges the gender norms that prescribe women to be passive, submissive, and compliant. However, it's important to note that the contemporary depictions of witches can sometimes still reinforce certain beauty standards, where witches are portrayed as young, attractive, and conventionally feminine, thereby perpetuating harmful beauty ideals and reinforcing the idea that women's power is conditional upon their appearance.

Fear, knowledge, and oppression

In relation to the theme fear, knowledge, and oppression, both analyses discuss the portrayal of women in a negative light through the use of the witch archetype. Both analyses show that the use of the witch archetype is a tool for marginalizing and demonizing women (Hester 1992; Stratton 2022; Sollee 2017). In the analysis of chapter 3 (r/HillaryForPrison), the focus lays on the use of the word "witch" as a tool for demonizing Hillary Clinton and other female politicians and making them appear irrational and dangerous. The posts analysed in this chapter actively use the word “witch” to characterise these women as irrational, insane, incapable, and wicked. The analysis also shows how this stereotype has been used to scapegoat women with power (Jensen 2007, 147), like Hillary Clinton, and suggests that the post's portrayal of her as a witch reinforces this stereotype. These analyses draw on Jensen's conflict-strategic persecution and scapegoat perspectives to further explain the implications of this portrayal (ibid., 144). This “conflict-strategic persecution perspectives” (ibid., 144) is seen in the use of the persecution and accusations of witches as a tool in a political conflict to eliminate women in power.

Similarly, the analysis of chapter 2 (r/WitchesvsPatriarchy) also discusses how the image of the witch has been used to demonize women throughout history but emphasizes this narrative in order to reclaim the power that this oppression holds. The posts challenge normative ideas about beauty, present a more nuanced view of gender and emphasize on the ways in which not conforming to these traditional ideas can make people feel like deviants. The authors of these posts represent these ‘deviant’ people and use their own experiences to make these ‘deviances’ specific and show how the image of the witch has been used as a tool of oppression against women and other people seen as deviant or out of place in society. But they also show how the word and figure of the witch can be reappropriated for socio-political empowerment. The archetype of the witch can be used to critique systems of power, including patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. The oppression of people in relation to witches can provide a feminist framework to critique and challenge systems of power that perpetuate

gender inequality and other forms of oppression. By invoking the archetype of the witch, feminists can draw attention to the ways in which power operates and intersects with gender, race, class, and other social categories. Although historically, the archetype of the witch has been weaponized to justify violence and oppression against marginalized communities, it can now be reclaimed to critique the systems that provoke this oppression.

Agency and the witch

Agency encompasses women's self-determination through various forms of self-definition and self-direction, including individual and collective actions aimed at resisting subordination or oppression (Abrams 1999, 807-808). The analysis of agency in the two chapters reveals a stark contrast between the two perspectives. The first analysis of 'r/WitchesVsPatriarchy' shows agency as the most frequent theme. In this analysis, the witch represents people who challenge and resist patriarchal structures and show how the accusations against them hold some degree of power (Jensen 2007). The analysis shows how embracing the figure of the witch holds power and can be used as a means to challenge patriarchal structures. The agency of the witch, in this context, represents the power to resist and fight against oppression. Here, the agency of the witch is not just about power and resistance, but also about reclaiming one's identity. It shows how the archetype of the witch is not easily defined, and how it represents a space where people can explore and embrace their own identities without the constraints of patriarchal norms. The agency of the witch represents the power to define oneself and resist societal pressures to conform to established norms.

In contrast, the analysis of the 'r/HillaryForPrison' posts shows a lack of agency given to women. The authors of these posts aim to demonize and delegitimize Hillary Clinton and other women in positions of power. The posts are filled with hate, conspiracies, and fearmongering. The authors do not give any agency to the women they are talking about, but rather aim to strip them of any power they hold. The authors are afraid of the agency that women in power represent, and they use the figure of the witch as a means to demonize and control them.

Depicting witches as benevolent figures can serve as symbols of female empowerment and agency. The image of a witch as a powerful, independent woman who possesses knowledge, skills, and the ability to control her own destiny can inspire women to embrace their own power and agency in a patriarchal society. This way, the archetype of the witch can be used to encourage women to stand up for their rights, assert their autonomy, and challenge

oppressive systems. However, it's important to recognize that not all women have access to the same levels of power and agency. Intersectional factors such as race, class, sexuality, and ability can impact women's experiences of empowerment and agency. Here, the ambiguity of the archetype of the witch can be used to highlight the intersectional nature of oppression and privilege. Depicting witches as both malevolent and benevolent figures can provide a lens to examine how different forms of oppression intersect.

Accusations and gossip

In chapter 2, the theme of accusations and gossip hardly came forward. In posts 2 and 3 of chapter 2 some degree of accusations may be present. In these posts the authors address behaviour and things they see within the community of the subreddit they do not like. People are accused of not being safe enough and hurting others in the community. Criticising this behaviour shows how accusations can be used to make people aware of their actions. Accusations, in this context, are a way to create a safer and more inclusive environment where people can coexist without fear of being marginalized or excluded and play a positive role in creating a more inclusive community. However, these sorts of accusations are not aimed at accusing women of witchcraft and are therefore not related to the accusations and gossip regarding witchcraft discussed in chapter 1.

On the other hand, in chapter 3 the idea of gossip and its negative connotations come to light. People are shaming Hillary Clinton and spreading false information about her health conditions and accuse her of horrible crimes which is aimed at delegitimizing her and making her seem untrustworthy (see chapter 3, post 5). When it comes to negative power (Dubisch 1986), gender plays an important role because it operates in oppressed communities were mostly women would use this form of power to create spaces to assert their identity. Because the authors of the posts are anonymous, in this context, negative power is more seen as some form of exercising power through spreading false information and fake news. Spreading information, in this case, is a form of power, whether that is the concept of negative power by Dubisch (1986) or not.

Overall, the analyses in these chapters demonstrate that gossip can hold significant power, through the ways in which it can be used to enforce social norms and hierarchies. In chapter 2, accusations are used to hold people accountable for their actions and create a more inclusive space. This highlights the positive power of gossip as a means of shaping social norms and behaviours in a community. However, in chapter 3, gossip is used negatively to

delegitimize and undermine political figures, showing how it can be used as a tool of oppression and control. This can be seen as an extension of narratives around gossip through time, especially how the term “gossip” went from meaning “female friend” in the Middle Ages to its shift to a derogatory connotation, emphasizing the negative perception of women’s relationships and the unwanted power these relationships built upon gossip held (Federici 2004, 186). In conclusion, the analyses highlight the dual nature of gossip, showcasing both its power in shaping social norms and its negative potential as a tool of oppression and control, echoing historical narratives and societal shifts in perception of gossip over time.

Posthumanism and the cyborg

Both the analysis of ‘r/WitchesVsPatriarchy’ and ‘r/HillaryForPrison’, discuss the idea of the cyborg and posthumanism as a means of challenging traditional power structures and binary oppositions. In chapter 2, the analysis of the subreddit witches vs. patriarchy emphasizes that women should be recognized as equal to men in their humanity and worth and challenges the essentialist notion that women are fundamentally different from men, by trying to dismantle power structures. The analysis of chapter 3 explores the depiction of Hillary Clinton as a monstrous witch and suggests that by this depiction of women as monstrous we can re-appropriate the archetype of the witch as a means of resistance against traditional power structures. The analysis of ‘r/WitchesVsPatriarchy’ emphasizes the agency and interdependence of all beings (with an ironic emphasis on women in post 4), while in chapter 3 I have shown that embracing the figure of the witch as a posthumanist symbol can challenge the very hierarchies that the posthumanist movement seeks to dismantle (chapter 3, post 5). Both analyses challenge essentialist notions of gender and identity: the analysis of post 4 in the second chapter asserts that women should be defined not by their biology, but by their humanity, which acknowledges the diversity and complexity of women's experiences, identities, and perspectives. Similarly, the analysis of the third chapter suggests that, even though people are posting inhumane conspiracy theories about Hillary Clinton eating children, a feminist approach can be used to reappropriate the witch as a posthumanist, empowering symbol that can break down traditional boundaries and norms.

However, a key difference that emerges in the two chapters is that the analysis of the subreddit ‘r/WitchesVsPatriarchy’ emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diversity and complexity of women's experiences, identities, and perspectives, while the analysis of the subreddit ‘r/HillaryForPrison’ focuses on the re-appropriation of the figure of the witch as a

posthumanist symbol of resistance and empowerment. The analysis I present in chapter 2 focuses on the rejection of essentialist arguments that there is a single fixed definition of womanhood, while in chapter 3 I have shown how the re-appropriation of the figure of the witch can challenge traditional power structures. So, both analyses use posthumanism and Haraway's figuration of the cyborg as lenses to study the posts, and they both challenge traditional patriarchal ideas about who can, and what it means, to be human.

Incorporating Haraway's concept of the cyborg into a critical analysis of the figure of the witch can provide additional insights into the ways in which the witch disrupts normative structures of power, challenges traditional boundaries, and inspires feminist activism. It invites a nuanced understanding of the witch as a complex, multi-faceted figure that embodies resistance, empowerment, and hybridity, and offers new possibilities for feminist discourse and action. By looking at the figure of the witch as a hybrid being, she is blurring the boundaries between human and non-human, natural and supernatural, and good and evil. Witches are often depicted as having powers that transcend human limitations, such as flying, shapeshifting, and communing with animals or elements of nature (Sollee 2017). This hybridity challenges rigid categories and disrupts traditional norms, inviting a reimagining of women's identities and capabilities beyond conventional expectations.

A second way to connect Haraway's cyborg to the figure of the witch is through the portrayal of the witch as a deeply embodied being – or even as witch becomes a gender identity itself (see chapter 2 post 5), connected to their own body, sexuality, and desires. This embodiment challenges the traditional dichotomy between mind and body and challenges the objectification and disembodiment of women in patriarchal systems[10] (Haraway 1991, 159; ibid., 180). The witch's embrace of her own body and her bodily autonomy can serve as a feminist affirmation of women's agency and ownership over their own bodies. Through this posthumanist, Harawayian lens, the figure of the witch becomes a symbol of resistance, agency, and empowerment that transcends traditional boundaries and hierarchies, and promotes a more inclusive and interconnected understanding of humanity.

[10] The portrayal of the witch as a deeply embodied being challenges the traditional idea that the mind and body are two separate entities, and instead sees them as interconnected and mutually influencing. Additionally, it suggests that this embodiment may be seen as a form of resistance to patriarchal systems that have historically treated women as objects of desire to be owned or controlled, rather than as fully embodied and autonomous beings (Haraway 1991, 159).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has delved into the multifaceted representation and usage of the archetype of the witch in contemporary internet culture through the research question: *How do internet communities (specifically on Reddit) shape, challenge, endorse or reflect ambiguity in the discourse about the figure of the witch, and how does this relate to the broader cultural understanding of the witch as an ambiguous archetype?* Through the investigation of various Reddit communities, the research has shed light on how different groups construct their understanding of the witch and the fundamental role that language and visual representations play in shaping these constructions.

Moreover, the research has highlighted the negotiation of ambiguity in the archetype of the witch by Reddit users. The witch can be described as an archetype because it represents a universal pattern of human behaviour and experiences across different contexts and time periods. The figure of the witch embodies a range of symbolic meanings and associations that have persisted throughout history and continue to shape contemporary cultural discourse. As an archetype, the witch is a powerful symbol that carries multiple layers of meaning, reflecting the complexity and ambiguity of the human experience. In this thesis, I have shown how the figure of the witch is interpreted and used in different ways by various internet communities, underscoring the versatility and adaptability of this archetype in reflecting and challenging cultural norms, values, and ideologies.

The analysis of 'r/WitchesVsPatriarchy' has revealed how the figure of the witch is employed as a means of challenging traditional gender roles and breaking down the boundaries between masculinity and femininity. In contrast, the examination 'r/HillaryForPrison' has shown how the figure of the witch is used to validate and reinforce traditional gender roles, attempting to maintain those boundaries. This difference in approach underscores the significant contrast in the analyses of both subreddits, with one critiquing cultural narratives tied to femininity and reproductive ability, while the other reproduces and reinforces them.

The posts and discussions reflect the complex interplay of interpretations and perceptions, where the agency of the witch is associated with both empowerment and resistance against patriarchal structures, as well as oppression and control of women in power. This observation further illustrates the complex nature of the figure of the witch as a symbol that can be interpreted in multiple ways, reflecting the ambiguity of the figure of the witch.

Furthermore, the findings of this thesis suggest that the discussions and representations of the archetype e of the witch on Reddit reflect and challenge broader cultural understandings of the witch as an ambiguous archetype. The research has highlighted how the witch can be used to convey messages and ideas about gender, fear, knowledge, oppression, gossip, agency, posthumanism and the cyborg and shows how the archetype of the witch in online communities is subjected to diverse interpretations, reflecting the complex interplay of cultural norms, values, and ideologies.

Writing this thesis, I started loving and admiring the figure of the witch even more than I already did. The archetype of the witch holds immense potential for representing self-empowerment. Historically portrayed as a marginalized and oppressed figure and reimagined in modern times as a symbol of resistance, rebellion, and personal power. I think that one of the most interesting aspects of the empowering figure of the witch is the way in which it challenges traditional notions of gender and power. By embodying both masculine and feminine qualities and the use witch as a gender identity, the witch represents a blurring of gender boundaries and a rejection of patriarchal structures that have historically oppressed women. This archetype offers a new way of understanding power, one that is not based on traditional notions of domination and control, but rather on personal agency and self-determination.

Moreover, the empowering archetype of the witch is a symbol of resistance against social norms and cultural expectations that limit individual potential. The witch challenges the status quo and offers a way of understanding the world that is not bound by traditional categories and boundaries. By embodying the archetype of the witch, individuals can tap into their own inner power and rebel against societal expectations that limit their potential. As people seek to understand themselves on a deeper level and to break free from the limitations of their social and cultural conditioning, the archetype of the witch offers a powerful symbol of personal transformation and growth.

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