

Monstrous Women: Exploring Historical Witchcraft and Its Presence in *The Witch*

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In the 1600s, the Puritans were still sailing to the United States—to them, the “New World”—in search of religious freedom and new beginnings; however, in their attempt to leave behind England and its influence, the Puritans brought with them Europe’s archaic views of witchcraft and women as monsters. The Puritans projected these fears of witchcraft onto women in a variety of ways: accusations of maleficarum, or the power “to cause harm to others by supernatural means”; disruptions in domestic processes, such as sudden spoiling of beer; healthcare complications; the obstruction of natural processes, like weather changes and crop yield; and more were used as rationales to

prosecute women in their communities (Karlsen 6-8). Witchcraft was also noted as a woman’s crime, with male accusation almost only occurring if the man was married or related to an already accused witch (Karlsen 49). This paranoia, largely due to overbearing religious influence, led to estimates of as many as “110,000 people . . . tortured as alleged witches and between 40,000 and 60,000 people . . . executed” worldwide from 1450 to 1750 (Russell and Brooks 12). Highlighting the consequences of religious persecution and female suppression, Robert Eggers’s *The Witch* masterfully portrays New England witchcraft as it was perceived in the 1600s, realizing societal oppression as a powerful force with many victims. Exploring a family crumbling from the influence of maleficarum and the strict

ABSTRACT

Accusations of witchcraft in America were often death sentences for women that society considered as acting outside of the norm; however, in Robert Eggers’s film, *The Witch*, embodying the role of a witch becomes a powerful tool in fighting Puritanical social expectations with magic, appearance, and behavior. Through the application of monster theory, historical contextualization, and feminist theory, this essay explores the implications of portraying the film’s main villain as a grotesque hag, the meaning behind its use of gory magic, why the protagonist chooses to become a witch herself, and finally, the consequences of othering marginalized groups from society.



religious expectations of their time, *The Witch* brings a new eye to New England's past, inspects its historical relationship with women, and even questions our own societal standards today. Through a historical contextualization of *The Witch*, an examination of women as monsters, and the exploration of modern feminist theory, the film's condemnation of the societal abjection of women who defy their mandated roles and embrace the power within inhabiting liminal spaces is revealed.

In order to immediately focus on the authority that religion has in Puritanical society, Eggers begins *The Witch* with the film's family being banished from their New England colony. William, the family's patriarch, has been accused of heresy. The audience only knows that William has been preaching a form of the gospels that the settlement cannot abide by. William's wife, Katherine; their eldest daughter, Thomasin; their eldest son, Caleb; their twins, Jonas and Mercy; and their infant son, Samuel, are sentenced alongside William. Once the family's fate has been determined, William and his family ride toward the vast wilderness as the gates of their former community close (0:01:08 - 0:03:19). The new setting of the film, now an open plain and expansive forest, becomes one of its most foreboding characteristics. As the soundtrack of the film builds, the eerie moans of a woman's soprano pierces the audience alongside cinematography that indicates a threatening presence past the tree line; in this instance, the witch is also introduced to the audience in impressive fashion, constructing a dichotomy in which this deeply religious family must coexist with a creature that is a complete inversion of their ideals.

Once the existence of the witch has been alluded to in this shot, her status as a malevolent force—rooted in actual historical conceptions of New England witches—is made immediately apparent through the lenses of several theoretical frameworks. The vilification of women as witches in Puritan America was based in deep cultural prejudices, perceptions of gender roles, and religiously-influenced societal structuring, creating a monsterization of women. This monsterization as it appears in *The Witch* will be analyzed through Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque, Mary Daly's "Hag-ography," and finally, an inversion of feminist mimesis theory.

DEFINING WITCHES THROUGH COHEN'S "MONSTER CULTURE"

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen posits in "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" that monsters generally operate within literary, cultural, and filmic texts in seven different ways. While witches could theoretically fulfill every thesis, the most prominent are: "The Monster's Body as a Cultural Body," "The Monster Dwells at



the Gates of Difference,” “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible,” and finally, “The Monster Stands at the Threshold . . . of Becoming.”

Cohen states that monsters become cultural bodies through the “embodiment of a certain cultural moment” (4). An application of Cohen’s theory to witches reveals that, in their case, witches exist as cultural bodies due to centuries of systematic misogyny. Puritanical societies attempted to justify this misogyny because they felt witches “[incorporated] fear, desire, anxiety, and dependency [into their world], giving them life and an uncanny independence” (Cohen 4). This created a real perception of women as monsters that resulted in witch-hunts and tireless persecution. As the first thesis, this theory stands as an introduction to the following theses that delve more specifically into the nuances of monsters as cultural symbols.

In his next thesis, “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference,” Cohen states that “monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, and sexual” (7). Carol Karlsen confirms that witches faced discrimination at all of these intersections in her book, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*. She states that “The characteristics of the New England witch—the demographic, economic, religious, and sexual—emerge from patterns found in accusations and in the life histories of the accused” (153). For example, on an economic level the accusations reveal that “the poor account for only a minority of the women accused. Even without precise economic indicators, it is clear that women from all levels of society were vulnerable to accusation” (Karlsen 78-79). Therefore, while poor women were often targeted purely based on socioeconomic status, women in positions of economic power were also threatened. Although women with better financial means had extensive resources available to them to combat their accusations, as well as developed social reputations to rely on as forms of defense, it becomes apparent that economic and sexual factors still dominated accusations. Similarly, “Often implicit and seldom measurable, official religious beliefs were nonetheless central in determining who witches were and what witches did” (Karlsen 119). Per Puritan belief, “There were only two kinds of women: godly women and witches,” which means that women who did not adhere to the biblical teachings of their towns were under automatic suspicion (Karlsen 251). This created a rigid social structure that kept women complacent under the teachings of their (always male) pastors and religious leaders (Karlsen 251). The idea that there were only godly women or witches becomes increasingly important in *The Witch*, as later analysis will reveal that turning to witchcraft and defying these patriarchal structures clearly becomes a source of empowerment for both the film’s protagonist (Thomasin) and antagonist (the witch).



Before delving into that analysis, though, it is integral to see the ways in which Cohen's fifth thesis, "The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible," reveals that "The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move," creating further impetus for female defiance (12). Cohen elaborates on this thesis, saying that "these borders are in place to control the traffic in women, or more generally establish homosocial bonds, the ties between men that keep a patriarchal society functional" (13). One of the most notable examples of how witchcraft was used to keep systems of patriarchal power in place in the "New World" was women's foray into medical treatment, especially in the form of midwives. Karlsen notes, "Midwives and healers, like women accused of abortion and infanticide, could have been likely suspects simply because they were ever-present reminders of the power that resided in women's life-giving and life-maintaining roles" (144). Furthermore, New England was in desperate need of doctors. With increasing numbers of female midwives and healers working alongside the few male physicians in the "New World," compared to the amount of male doctors involved in witchcraft cases, "one of the unspoken (and probably unacknowledged) functions of New England witchcraft was to discredit women's medical knowledge in favor of their male competitors" (Karlsen 144-145). In other words, for some women, simply ensuring that women in the community have safe, successful childbirths, or are otherwise in good health, could garner accusations from men who felt that women were unfit for medical practice.

Finally, the last thesis that Cohen writes is "The Monster Stands at the Threshold . . . of Becoming." He believes "Monsters always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear knowledge, *human* knowledge" (20, emphasis original): "These monsters ask us how we perceive the world . . . They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perceptions of difference, [and] our tolerance towards its expression" (Cohen 20). Through *The Witch*, Eggers does precisely that. His recreation of the witch as a cultural symbol forces audiences to consider misogyny, media portrayals and expectations of women, and religion as a dominating force of social structuring, both in Puritanical America and the modern United States.

ABJECTION AND MAGIC AS SOURCES OF POWER

Due to the prejudiced nature of Puritanical society, women who embodied Cohen's definition of monstrous—women like Thomasin and the titular witch—were often banished or accused of being witches, making them human symbols



of the abject. Abjection is defined by philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva in her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, as a “jettisoned object” that “is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). She goes on to say that the abject is “a piece of filth, waste, or dung” and “the spasms and vomiting that protect me” (3). These objects, in turn, create a situation in which “I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (3). In other words, the abject is typically sourced from our own beings, but, being deemed as other, disturbing, or disgusting, we question whether “I” truly consists of these abjected objects, effectively creating a form of identity crisis. While this concept is typically applied to the individual being, abjection becomes an apt metaphor for Puritan America and its relationship to divergent women. When inhabiting the space of other, women become abjections of patriarchal society and powerful reminders of this society’s limitations. Therefore, witches are the pinnacle of this abjectness and, as seen through the lens of *The Witch*, become powerful forces that may destroy families, communities, and society’s rules, regardless of the community’s faith in their religion or social constructions.

One of the primary ways in which the Puritans abjected women who threatened patriarchal society was to make women monstrous through accusations of magic and maleficarum. Early modern Europe and Puritan America believed that witches primarily adhered to three categories of magic, but, in *The Witch*, only “the third category [which includes] such things as transvection (flying through the air), metamorphosis (shifting form), the use of familiars, blighting crops, raising storms, and otherwise controlling the forces of nature” is featured (Donovan 58). While the practice of actual magic likely did not occur historically and only existed as a means to justify the abjection of and accusations against Puritanical women, the witch’s first physical appearance in the film involves her successfully creating a flying potion, revealing that *The Witch* operates under the pretense that witches did exist in the supernatural sense. This is significant because the antagonist’s magical abilities also reveal that, in *The Witch*, there is real, tangible power in choosing to resist a society built to abject individuals at every othered intersection, driving the film’s message that defiance is empowering.

This first display of magic in the film—the witch creating her flying potion—is completed when the witch abducts the family’s infant son Samuel while Thomasin plays peek-a-boo with him at the edge of the wood. Once captured, Samuel is laid nude on a cloth in the witch’s lair, depicted as a cave in the woods. In a sudden cut, an old nude woman is seen churning and grinding together Samuel’s remains in a bowl. After completing her concoction, the witch exits her lair to



coat herself with the potion under the moonlight. This is coupled with images of her writhing on the forest floor, clutching a branch. Finally, we see her take flight on the branch, rising into the frame before the full moon (00:06:27-00:09:31). This corresponds with beliefs surrounding witchcraft in which “Witches were widely accused of using blood and parts of the human body—particularly bodies of babies—[in their brews]” (Donovan 59-60). In portraying this particularly gruesome form of witchcraft, *The Witch* recalls the aforementioned image of infanticide. Magic as infanticide becomes a representation of abjection here. The witch would be demonized by the Puritans for breaking the codes of woman as responsible for childcare and, as a result, is literally cast out, explaining the witch’s inhabitation of her cave, a border space away from society. Because the witch has already been abjected and accepted her status as demonized, she uses Samuel’s sacrifice as a source of power, making his death the catalyst for the remainder of the terror she conducts throughout the film. This sacrifice gives the witch the power to obtain revenge on the society that abjected her, symbolized through William and his family.

Samuel’s death is able to act as a catalyst due to the fact that the remains of an infant—preferably unbaptized as Samuel was—were not only associated with transvection brews but rumored to give witches other powers, such as the ability of metamorphosis. The witch utilizes metamorphosis as a way to display her power and enact revenge for her abjection, which will be elaborated upon throughout this essay.

GROTESQUENESS, HAG-OGRAPHY, AND ITS RELATION TO *THE WITCH*

The Witch’s historical contextualization and theoretical definition of women as monsters/abjections of patriarchy is able to be further built upon with its display of the grotesque form as a means to find power within an abjected border space. Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin defines the grotesque in his book, *Rabelais and His World*, as “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, [and] abstract” down to “the material level,” subsequently focusing on the “degradation” of form (19). The body is seen as “extremely exaggerated,” concentrating on the “acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth” (18, 21). Initially, the notion of the grotesque is interpreted as an obsession with humiliation and matters of form that humans tend to find disgusting (defecation) or inappropriate to discuss (copulation). Therefore, this concept, when applied to the female form, appears as the ultimate departure from the feminine body ideal; however, Bakhtin asserts that “This exaggeration has a positive, assertive character”; “The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance,”



resulting in a “triumphant” body that defies the norm, and in turn, is meant to be celebrated (19).

That being said, the grotesque body is not typically celebrated by most. In fact, media articles about *The Witch* label the film’s antagonist as “a grotesque creature in the woods” (Lee), “absolutely chilling” (Chitwood), and “a gnarled hag, framed like the reverse shot of Goya’s *Saturn Devouring His Son* . . . [with] withered flesh” (Ehrlich), recalling this conception of grotesqueness as inherently frightening and villainous. Therefore, Eggers’s witch not only fulfills traditional Puritanical codes of witchcraft but also resembles stereotypical portrayals of witches identified by researchers Jeffrey B. Russell and Alexander Brooks “As imaginary old hags with warts on their noses, conical hats, broomsticks, black cats, and evil, cackling laughs” (8). The witch herself is an old woman, which Russell and Brooks consider “a heedless exaggeration and a distortion of the truth . . . [as] many female witches have been quite young—sometimes even children” (12). Furthermore, the witch is always depicted as nude, with bruises and other wounds visible on her body. Similarly, her hair is thin, her teeth have rotted, her skin sags, and her nose is crooked, fulfilling every stereotypical depiction. Even her laugh is the iconic witch’s cackle. The fact that this is the only dialogue she has in the film further dehumanizes her. However, when this departure from the ideal is coupled with theory about the grotesque, the value of the witch as a hag can be uncovered.

For example, Bakhtin illustrates this idea later in his text when he further explores the grotesque body of the hag through his analysis of the Kerch terracotta collection. It is interesting to note that these images portray grotesqueness as revelatory rather than oppressive. The images are specifically

figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet informed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. (Bakhtin 25-26)

Kerch’s collection recalls the image of the witch with her “gnarled” (Chitwood), “chilling” (Ehrlich), and withered appearance. While the witch is not pregnant in the film, she does embody the “life . . . in its two-fold, contradictory process,” presenting as both a young woman and the hag-like witch in the film (Bakhtin 26). As a hag, she represents a form of death, senile and decaying. Her body shrivels, and she is isolated from society; however, as a young woman, the witch reveals her form as contradictory, one that may also embody the “ideal” and regenerate into



something new and fresh. The witch is not uncomfortable in either form—her power and her fearsomeness depend on both. Finally, her default choice to reside as a hag rather than live as her “idealized” form creates the overall impression that the witch’s grotesque appearance is to be relished as powerful, a breakage from repressive norms, and overall, celebratory.

This, however, does not mean that the witch cannot be powerful within her “idealized” form. At one point in the film, Caleb, the family’s eldest son, is stranded in the woods. He finds himself standing before an ominous cave obviously belonging to the witch. Suddenly, a young woman, wearing a red cloak and a low cut dress—who the audience knows is actually the witch—emerges from the cave. Although Caleb appears frightened, he advances towards her. As the woman leans into Caleb’s face, about to kiss him, her haggard hand in its default form clutches the back of his head and violently pulls him into the cave (00:39:12-00:42:11). The witch—using her powers of metamorphosis as a tool to lure Caleb—invokes Bakhtin’s contradictory process as well as hypersexualized notions of Puritanical witchcraft, where it was believed that accused “women had committed or were thought to have committed fornication . . . or other sexual or sexually related offenses” (Karlsen 196).

The witch’s power is further displayed when Caleb mysteriously reappears at the homestead after his kidnapping. He is nude, incoherent, and showing obvious signs of possession. Caleb’s possession continues the consistency of Puritanical conceptions of witchcraft. The Puritans believed that “Favorite subjects for possession were children and nuns, both classes of innocents that demons might easily influence” (Donovan 67). The symptoms of possession “included writhing and contortions of abdominal origin, vomiting of strange objects, change of voice to deep gruff tones (‘belly speaking’), the incessant use of obscenities and blasphemies, lewd exposure, and acts of abnormal strength” (Donovan 66-67). While Caleb only exhibits contortions and the vomiting of a whole apple with a single bite in it—simultaneously mocking an Edenic biblical symbol, as well as symbolizing a lie Caleb told to his mother to cover for a hunting trip he took with William—other instances of maleficarum are present as well. In fact, witches “[were] frequently suspected of causing illness or death, particularly to spouses or infants and young children. Typically, an accuser would speak of a ‘thriving child’ who suddenly ‘have a great screech out as if it was greatly hurt,’ after which it did ‘pine away,’ continuing ‘in a sad Condition’ until it ‘soe dyed’” (Karlsen 6). Therefore, while Caleb does not experience shifts in vocal tones, nor does he use obscenities, his possession ultimately leads to the aforementioned pining away and death, all brought about by the witch in her “ideal” form (00:54:10-01:00:30).



Finally, the rhetorical value in portraying the witch primarily as a hag is further elaborated on by Mary Daly, a scholar who wrote the book *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. In this text, Daly uses the term “Hag-ography” to describe the act of recovering the overlooked history of women who were either accused of witchcraft and/or coded as hags (15). “Hag-ography” concerns itself with celebrating the image of the hag, noting that “the beauty of strong, creative women is ‘ugly’ by misogynistic standards of ‘beauty’” (15). One aspect of this celebration is seen through Daly’s reveling in the laughter of the hag. She states that “Hags may rage and roar, but they do not titter,” leaving the act of tittering to “[s]elf-loathing ladies” (17). Furthermore, Daly believes that “There is nothing like the sounds of women really laughing. The roaring laughter of women is like the roaring of the eternal sea. Hags can cackle and roar at themselves, but more and more, one hears them roaring at the reversal that is patriarchy” (17). The idea of a hag’s (or witch’s) laugh becomes poignant when considering the witch’s previously mentioned cackle in the film. Through the lens of Daly’s “Hag-ography,” the witch’s cackle serves as another means of empowerment, laughing in the face of a patriarchal society that would rather have women politely “titter” while loathing themselves. Through the lens of Bakhtin and Daly, it becomes clear that *The Witch* utilizes the grotesque and “Hag-ography” to show that the life of the hag is not only an empowering one that is relevant to the witch but also to Thomasin—the protagonist and eldest daughter of William and Katherine—later in the film. Together, in rejecting social expectations, Thomasin and the witch convey the power found within embodying the hag, turning their titters into cackles through a crucial inversion of mimesis theory.

ANTI-MIMESIS AND ITS USEFULNESS TO THE OTHER

As the witch becomes an obvious portrayal of the hag and the grotesque, Thomasin is realized as a case for anti-mimesis theory. Contemporary phenomenologist Susan Kozel explains the concept of mimesis through her critique of Luce Irigaray, the originator of this theory in a feminist context, in order to sharpen the use of mimesis. In her essay, “The Diabolical Strategy of Mimesis: Luce Irigaray’s Reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” Kozel defines mimesis as:

a powerful tool available for women to subvert the social order as it is presently defined and preserved by patriarchal structures. As the phase that aims to bring about the conditions for the possibility of social and cultural change, mimesis involves women consciously stepping into the sexual stereotypes provided for them by men. It thus becomes a process of eroding the stereotypes from within. (116)



In spite of mimesis's potential as a powerful feminist tool, Kozel warns that it “runs the risk of silencing the other”—because oftentimes the other does not have the privilege needed to successfully embody these stereotypes—and thus explores its use in order to “[better situate it] at the root of social and political change” (114, 116). Through this further definition of the term, its application to *The Witch* becomes evident: instead of embodying the stereotypes of womanhood to exhibit change from within, the witch as a monster embodies the antithesis of accepted womanhood in order to make a political and empowering statement about rigid conceptions of femininity operating within the patriarchy. This creates an anti-mimesis that still allows for the Puritan woman to erode stereotypes but to do so through resistance rather than adopting these stereotypes herself.

Before Thomasin embodies anti-mimesis theory, she actually represents an embodiment of mimesis in its traditional definition. In fact, Thomasin prays to God at the beginning of the film, confessing, “I know I deserve more shame and misery in this life and everlasting hellfire. But I beg Thee, for the sake of Thy son, forgive me, show me mercy, show me Thy light” (00:04:55-00:05:58). Thomasin also tends to the animals on the homestead, watches over the younger children, and, finally, obeys her mother's commands and takes her “father's rags to the brook and [washes] them” as well as “[brushes] out his woolens” (00:20:30-00:20:57). The expectations Thomasin's mother levies onto her correspond to the Puritans' ideal roles for a wife, which included “ordering things within doors,’ by which was meant the day-to-day maintenance of the family and the supervision of young children, older daughters, and female servants” (Karlsen 169). As Thomasin's initial conformity to society's expectations—which are echoed by her mother—are revealed, Thomasin's use of traditional mimesis is shown as a survival tactic rather than a tool for dismantling patriarchy (Karlsen 169). Therefore, Thomasin is presented with two choices: continue down the path of Puritanical idealism and use mimesis to merely survive or give in to her rebellious nature and utilize the concepts of anti-mimesis to obtain the power, status, and opportunity of a witch. She selects the latter.

Thomasin's decision to utilize anti-mimesis, sign the Devil's book, and become a witch herself is one that maintains narrative coherency within *The Witch's* feminist theoretical framework. Thomasin's first expression of anti-mimesis theory, though, is less powerful than pledging herself to the Devil. As feminist critic Andrea Dworkin states in her book, *Woman Hating*, “Women are no less terrified [of the wicked witch], for we know that not to be passive, innocent, and helpless is to be actively evil” (35). Thomasin, however, being a sympathetic protagonist, forces the audience to confront a female character that is not passive, innocent, or helpless,



and still relate to her rather than vilify her. For example, Thomasin overhears her mother telling William, “Our daughter hath begat the sign of her womanhood . . . She’s old enough. She must leave to serve another family” (00:32:20-00:34:27). The parents’ disregard for Thomasin, readily sending her away, creates compassion for Thomasin. Similarly, unhappy with the notion that she may leave, Caleb, her brother, concocts a plan to find food for the family and keep Thomasin from leaving. Instead of allowing Caleb to go alone, Thomasin forces him to let her join his journey into the woods. Her adventurous spirit is therefore in contrast to the expectations Dworkin identifies, which are thus reinforced by her parents and Puritanical society. This subversion, without adopting expected sexual stereotypes, reveals the ways in which anti-mimesis may work on a smaller scale.

In addition to defying societal standards, Thomasin also defies her parents on numerous occasions, most notably with her father. After the witch murders Caleb, William tells Thomasin, “A council will be called . . . Caleb disappeared with thee!” (01:01:31-01:01:52). Here, William accuses Thomasin of being a witch, implying her practice of maleficarum on her brother due to the fact that they went into the woods together and he returned witched. Thomasin gives a passionate reply, saying, “Why have you turned against me? . . . You ask me to speak truth? You and Mother are planned to rid the farm of me. Aye. I heard you speak of it. Is that truth? . . . You are a hypocrite! . . . You took Caleb to the wood and let me take the blame of that too. Is that truth? You let Mother be as thy master! You cannot bring the crops to yield! You cannot hunt! . . . Thou canst do nothing save cut wood! And you will not hear me! (01:02:15-01:03:29)

This plea for William to listen to her simultaneously reveals her independence and willingness to question norms. She accuses her father of acting outside of the expectations of men just as she is aware she does not conform to the expectations of women. Anti-mimesis manifests itself in this exchange, then, through Thomasin’s further refusal to be passive; Thomasin also embodies anti-mimesis in her ultimate acceptance of her perceived status as a monstrous woman.

When Thomasin is presented with the opportunity to sign the Devil’s book, the allure and power within witchcraft is revealed. At this point in the film, the witch has killed Thomasin’s entire family, whether through direct maleficarum or the tangential hysteria the witch has caused: only Thomasin remains. The Devil—who takes the shape of Black Phillip, the family’s black billy goat, throughout the movie—approaches Thomasin in human-like form and asks a simple question: “Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?” She answers, “Yes.” The Devil continues, “Wouldst thou like to see the world? . . . Dost thou see a book before thee? Remove thy shift.” Thomasin, nude



like the original witch of the wood, stands before the Devil's book. "I cannot write my name," she says. "I will guide thy hand," the Devil assures (01:23:10-01:25:19). This dramatization of signing the Devil's book is again in line with Puritanical notions of witchcraft. As Karlsen notes, "All of the powers a witch possessed, including maleficarum, were said to have derived from the covenant she had signed with the Devil. Satan gave her these powers, as well as his promise to satisfy her worldly desires (a promise many people believed he never kept), in return for her allegiance" (9). That being said, there is no indication that the Devil does not keep this promise. Instead, when Thomasin follows him into the wood to a coven of witches dancing and chanting around a fire, Thomasin is filled with power. The final shot of the film depicts her ascending into the air, laughing while she basks in the wonder of her newfound life. It is the first time Thomasin expresses pure joy, reiterating that there is empowerment in inhabiting a monstrous border space (01:25:30-01:27:40).

CONCLUSION

Once Thomasin signs the Devil's book in *The Witch's* conclusion, a cyclical theme in the film is closed; the creature that pursues Thomasin's family is ultimately what she becomes. There is no presumed glamour in Thomasin's choice. Instead, the audience is led to believe that she will now become like the witch that tormented her. Dworkin says that "The roles available to women and men are clearly articulated in fairy tales. The characters of each are vividly described, and so are the modes of relationship possible between them. We see that powerful women are bad, and that good women are inert" (45). Thomasin, however, rejects the social codes that were forced upon her, choosing to live a life that is free of patriarchal influence, and breaks the narrative coherency that Dworkin highlights. She deserts society to live life as a grotesque hag that will revel in her power, her appearance, and her fearsome nature. Without a theoretical framework to guide a reading of *The Witch*, Thomasin's choice may seem confusing; she is, after all, a Christian girl who was accused of witchcraft, denied it, and is now seen embodying the life of the witch. But, through the exploration of her rebellious nature as well as her condemnation of Puritanical societal constructs in her passionate reply to her father, Thomasin's choice to defy patriarchal prescriptions of gender corresponds with the film's message. *The Witch*, then, acts as a defense of the women who were executed for their perceived crimes as witches. In the end, the life of a witch is one that protests the norm, forces society to see the other, and challenges us to accept their presence or risk the consequences of suppressing them.

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