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Revolting Bodies: Abjection and the Monstrous Feminine in 'The Witch'

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Revolting Bodies

Abjection and the Monstrous Feminine in *The Witch*

By
Ann McKenzie Roge

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in Film & Media Studies.

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Ann McKenzie Roge has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Film & Media Studies.

Tarik Elseewi

Whitman College
May 10, 2017

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. (1)

*(*Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*)

Why has the concept of woman as monster been neglected in feminist theory? … A study of horror reveals that this genre is also intimately bound up with questions of sexuality and the way in which woman's abjection helps to found the patriarchal symbolic order. (152)

(Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*)

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Drawing primarily on Julia Kristeva's theory of "the abject," as well as Barbara Creed's novel The Monstrous Feminine*, this paper serves as an exploration of the various functions of the female body in the horror genre—specifically, in the context of Robert Eggers' 2015 horror film, The Witch. Through an examination of psychosexual and socio-historical constructions of the female body as 'other', in conversation with several key themes, scenes and characters from* The Witch, *I attempt to illustrate many of the complex connections between horror and the female body/female sexuality.*

Literature Review

Julia Kristeva

In her seminal work, *Powers of Horror,* Julia Kristeva addresses, and theoretically explores, the complex phenomenon of the "abject". Kristeva attaches new meaning to the term 'abject'—commonly associated with misery and hopelessness—and repurposes it to describe the non-subject, non-object entity that exists on the boundaries of the self and society. She begins with a simple explanation of the abject as related to "food-loathing," which she believes is "the most elementary and archaic form of abjection." (2) For Kristeva, the involuntary revulsion that humans feel towards things that could potentially harm them—rotten food, filth, excrement, etc.—is a means by which the body seeks to protect itself. While food loathing is one obvious way in which the body—or, the self—posits a potentially harmful entity as other, and refuses to assimilate it, Kristeva expands this idea to include all entities that compromise the existence of the self. She explains:

> Nausea makes me balk at that milk cream…'I' want none of that element…'I do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it…Refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (3)

For Kristeva, the abject exists on this border of the self's conditions for existence. A corpse, for instance, reminds us that our hold on life, and on our self-as-living is a tenuous state, with permeable borders; serving as a physical marker of this intangible fear, the corpse inspires horror and revulsion. Bodily fluids and refuse, once they have left the body, are no longer a part of the self, despite having come from within it—and this thin line between within and outside-of is one that, according to Kristeva, is where the abject exists as a direct result of a blurring of boundaries. She argues that these boundaries, necessary to the conditions of human existence, are threatened by the abject, which "disturbs identity, system, order…[and] does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (4) The abject is "the place where meaning collapses," (2) and serves to simultaneously highlight the need for, and threaten the existence of, boundaries, rules and customs.

Important to note in Kristeva's work is her description of the abject as something that both terrifies and intrigues. Because the abject is so closely tied with our own understandings of our existence as self, it is, according to Kristeva, "something rejected from which one does not part" (4). Other theorists have elaborated on this understanding of the abject as something that is simultaneously "part of us but separated from our own sense of self", a duality that disrupts identity, system and order (Vachhani, 655). Theorist Rina Arya well describes this when she writes,

> The dual nature of the abject explains the precarious nature of 'I'. The borders of the self are neither fixed nor unshakeable. Once expelled, the 'other', or the abject does not disappear but hovers and challenges the boundaries of selfhood. The abject…has the propensity to shatter the unity of the self, yet…it takes us to the heart of our being, defines our identity. (6)

Fear of the other has consistently driven (patriarchal) social order. A deeper examination of that fear suggests that, indeed, it is often a fear of the other-within that has historically informed the religiosities, fears and cultural markers of difference in human societies—a theme that I will explore at a later point in this essay. Further elaborating on this complicated overlap between self, other, and the meeting of the two, Kristeva grounds abjection and the fear it inspires in the subconscious memory of the separation that takes place during birth. She writes,

> Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of preobjectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be. (10)

This possession by, and later separation from, another being, highlights well the anxieties the abject inspires—the frightening border where the self is compromised. As other theorists have pointed out, however, "the desire to escape abjection has its roots in the fear of the mother's body, one which needs to be understood as a construction marked by patriarchal culture." (Vachhani, 655[1]) Here, we see the point at which the abject moves from a theoretical concept to a set of anxieties and behaviors with very real consequences. As Kristeva writes,

> Let us enter, for a moment, into that Freudian aporia called primal repression. Curious primacy, where what is repressed cannot really be held down, and where what represses always already borrows its strength and authority from what is apparently very secondary: language. (13)

In Kristeva's view, the primal instincts, fears, and anxieties inspired by the abject are unavoidably marked by more tangible cultural trends, and vice versa. She references a variety of religions in which fear of the abject quite literally translates into a set of written laws, practices and customs to avoid abjection. For Kristeva, the ways in

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[1] Stacey, J. *Teratologies—A Cultural Study of Cancer.* Routlege, 1997.

which fear of the abject manifests in culture is often through patriarchy, stemming from fear of the female, sexual other. Patriarchal power structures—often justified through religion—seek to impose borders for social safety, working under the assumption that woman, the sexual other, possessor of generative powers which posit her existence as one constantly teetering on the blurred lines between nature and society, is seen as dangerous:

> Biblical impurity is permeated with the tradition of defilement; in that sense, it *points to* but does not *signify* an autonomous force that *can* be threatening for divine agency. I shall suggest that such a force is rooted, historically (in the history of religions) and subjectively (in the structuration of the subject's identity) in the cathexis of maternal function—mother, woman, reproduction…a power…that *might* become autonomous evil but *is not*, so long as the hold of a subjective and social symbolic order endures. (Kristeva, 91)

Thus, "what we designate as 'feminine,' far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an 'other' without a name" (Kristeva, 58).

This theoretical idea of abjection anxiety made manifest in culture is at the heart of why Kristeva's work can be so useful in analyzing film texts. As Valerie Wee explains,

> Western horror cinema has long grappled with gender trouble. Many scholars interested in issues of gender and horror tend to adopt a psychoanalytic approach, founded on the Freudian notion that horror films articulate hidden repressed fears that cannot be overtly mentioned and discussed. (158)

The abject is evident in the horror film genre, which relies heavily upon things like blood, death, bodies, excrement, etc. to frighten and excite audiences. As Barbara Creed wryly notes, "When we say such-and-such a horror film 'made me sick' or 'scared the shit out of me', we are actually foregrounding that specific horror film as a 'work of abjection' or 'abjection at work'—almost in a literal sense." (10) Spectators of the horror film perform exactly what theorist Rina Arya describes as

interaction with the abject: "we are impelled to move away, but then to look back, setting up a cycle of repulsion and attraction, fear and intrigue" (Arya, 2) On a deeper level, the horror genre and its relationship with fear and the abject is one that many scholars have argued is rooted in psychoanalysis. As Kristeva herself explains,

> The fear of which one can speak, the one therefore that has a signifiable object, is a more belated and more logical product that assumes all earlier alarms of archaic, non-representable fear. Spoken fear…is disclosed as the fear of an unlikely object that turns out to be a substitute for another. (34)

The horror text can be read as one that articulates repressed, unspoken fears in a given society by offering audiences a chance to interact with their most primal anxieties presented to them in the guise of other, more comfortably frightening stand-ins. By analyzing horror texts through a psychoanalytical lens, we may infer what the repressed fears of a given society are, based on the trends present in that society's horror genre. As Grosz writes, "A fascination with monsters illustrates our 'pleasure and fascination with mirror images, a fascination with the limits of our own identities as they are witnessed from outside'" (Vachhani, 658[2]). Barbara Creed corroborates this idea further, when she argues,

> What becomes apparent in reading [Kristeva's] work is that definitions as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection—particularly in relation to the following religious 'abominations': sexual immorality and perversion, corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest. These forms of abjection are also central to the construction of the monstrous in the modern horror film. (Creed, 9)

Barbara Creed

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[2] Grosz, E. "Intolerable ambiguity: freaks as/at the limit", in Garland Thomson, R. (Ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body,* New York University Press, 1996, pp. 55-66.

Creed devotes her powerful book, *The Monstrous Feminine* to an exploration and analysis of the representation of woman-as-monster in the horror genre. She classifies this figure as the "monstrous feminine," and argues that the monstrous feminine in film represents "what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject." (1) According to Creed,

> The reasons why the monstrous feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience…As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase, 'monstrous feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity. (3)

Creed believes that male anxieties surrounding woman's presumed sexual difference are what lie at the heart of the construction of female characters in horror. She begins by examining the psychoanalytical approaches historically used in the analyzing of horror texts—specifically, the Freudian notion of the castrated female. According to Freud—and other psychoanalysts—castration fear arises in childhood, when young boys begin to suspect that their mother, who lacks a penis such as the one they recognize on themselves, has somehow lost her penis—introducing the frightening possibility of castration. The mother, therefore, comes to represent the new, anxiety-inducing possibility that the boy (and later, man) may become castrated as well. Creed writes,

> The concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration…mediated by a narrative about the *difference* of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator. (2)

To the extent that sexual difference in the female is a patriarchal, constructed marker of monstrosity and danger, Creed raises no objection—however, she does take issue

with the pervasive notion of the woman as castrated victim that continuously arises in the work of other theorists. She writes,

> Nearly all…deal with woman as victim in the horror film. The main reason for this is that most writers adopt Freud's argument that woman terrifies because she is castrated, that is, already constituted as victim. Such a position only serves to reinforce patriarchal definitions of woman which represent and reinforce the essentialist view that woman, *by nature* is a victim. My intention is to explore the representation of woman in the horror film and to argue that woman *is* represented as monstrous in a significant number of horror films. (7)

She qualifies:

> I am not arguing that simply because the monstrous feminine is constructed as an active rather than passive figure that this image is 'feminist' or 'liberated'. The presence of the monstrous feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity. However, this presence does challenge the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position and the female spectator in a passive, masochistic one. (7)

Creed recognizes abjection—as described by Kristeva—as omnipresent in the horror film text. From the bodily fluids, wastes, refuse and gore inherent in the genre, to the concepts of borders between human existence and non-existence, the themes of the horror genre are rooted deeply in abjection theory. Creed focuses heavily on the ways in which the horror text highlights borders between humanity and what lies beyond it, and the role of the 'monster' in calling attention to the existence of these borders:

> The concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same—to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. (Creed, 11)

For Creed, "virtually all horror texts represent the monstrous-feminine in relation to Kristeva's notion of maternal authority and the mapping of the self's clean and proper

body" (13), in regards to female sexual difference. Kristeva's notion of the maternal body as a central locus of abjection and existence anxiety, a "site of conflicting desires" (Creed, 11), becomes a key point in Creed's conceptualization of the female, maternal body as one intricately linked to ideas of the monstrous-feminine. Creed and Kristeva both see the amorphous, pre-birth mother-child relationship as one when "a 'fusion between mother and nature' existed; when bodily wastes, while set apart from the body, were not seen as objects of embarrassment and shame" (Creed, 13) and according to Creed,

> The modern horror film often 'plays' with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore, deliberately pointing to the fragility of the symbolic order in the domain of the body where the body never ceases to signal the repressed world of the mother. (13)

Thus the horror text invokes our anxiety by calling attention to the fragility of borders constructed to maintain social and bodily order—a fragility highlighted by the anxieties which stem from the initial self-lessness and border-lessness inherent in the primordial mother-child relationship. Therefore, "the feminine is not *per* se a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse'" (Creed, 70[3]). This "'tells us more about male desires and fears rather than elucidating feminine desire or subjectivity'" (Vachhani, 656[4]). For Creed, "the abject is laced on the side of the feminine: it exists in opposition to the paternal symbolic, which is governed by rules and laws." (37) She asks,

> Why has the concept of woman as monster been neglected in feminist theory? A major reason is that the majority of feminist articles on the cinema have addressed genres such as the melodrama, film noir and the woman's film which, at first glance, appear to be more directly concerned with questions of

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[3] Creed, Barbara. *Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection.* The John Logie Baird Centre, 1986.
[4] Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous Feminine.* Routlege, 1993.

> female desire and phallocentric representations of female sexuality. A study of horror reveals that this genre is also intimately bound up with questions of sexuality and the way in which woman's abjection helps to found the patriarchal symbolic order. (152)

As Stephen Neale writes in *Genre*[5], which Creed refers to,

> 'It could well be maintained that it is women's sexuality, that which renders them desirable—but also threatening—to men, which constitutes the real problem that the horror cinema exists to explore, and which constitutes also and ultimately that which is really monstrous.' (Creed, 5)

Ultimately, Neale and Creed argue that

> There are two ways of interpreting the monster. The first is that the monster signifies the boundary between the human and the non-human. The second is that it is the male fear of castration which ultimately produces and delineates the monstrous…Man's fascination with and fear of female sexuality is endlessly reworked within the signifying practices of the horror film. Thus, the horror film offers an abundant display of fetishistic effects whose function it is to attest to the perversity of the patriarchal order founded, as it is, on a misconception—the erroneous belief that woman is castrated. (Creed, 5)

Creed dedicates the rest of her book to exploring different kinds of monstrous-feminine: specifically, the witch, the possessed woman and woman as castrator, all of which will be explored more fully in this paper. She concludes her writing with a critique of how spectatorship and audience play gendered roles in the horror genre, a topic that I will also explore more fully at a later point.

Laura Mulvey

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,* theorist Laura Mulvey explores the ways in which the fascination our society has with film exposes and reinforces "pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him" (833)—namely, the Freudian concepts of

[5] Neale, Stephen. *Genre*. British Film Institute, 1980.

scopophilia as well as castration anxiety. Mulvey explains "the paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world" (833). She argues that an idea of woman stands as lynchpin to the system:

> It is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies...Woman stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (833-34)

By Freudian logic (according to Mulvey), woman's place in patriarchal society is contingent entirely upon her lack of a phallus—which translates into a lack of social agency and power. At the same time, the female body has been heavily eroticized, especially in film, a theme Mulvey explores through the lens of "scopophilia," or, pleasure in looking at another subject whom you take as object. Scopophilia, for the spectator of film, combines with a form of narcissism manifest in the enjoyment humans derive from looking at forms similar/recognizable to them—i.e., Lacan's "mirror images"—allows for "temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego." (836) As these two psychosexual impulses brew in the audience of a film, Mulvey writes that,

> Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as an erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. (838)

The male participant in patriarchy, possessor of the phallus, also strives to possess woman, in order to quell the "deeper problem" that the female figure poses to patriarchy:

> She…connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of penis, implying a threat of castration…Ultimately the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as…the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. (Mulvey, 840)

Mulvey argues that the male participant has two avenues for an assuagement of this anxiety available to him:

> Preoccupation with the reenactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, de-mystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star). This second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying itself. (840)

Mulvey argues that men deal with their anxieties over the female form by either "devaluing, punishing or saving the guilty object," or "turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" (Mulvey, 840).

<u>**1. A Dangerous Difference**</u>

Theorist Rina Arya writes that when one witnesses the abject, it causes "offence because we do not want to witness something that should be happening behind closed doors and, in particular, when it occurs in such an unsavoury fashion (1) and this phenomenon is ever present in Robert Eggers' 2015 film *The Witch.* Indeed, upon its release, critic Drew McWeeny noted, "It feels like we're watching something…we should not be seeing."[6] Fear of the abject, as well as fear of the monstrous feminine, drives the film from beginning to end, not the least of which is represented in the patriarchal, religious power structure the film is grounded in.

In its most basic form, *The Witch* is both a horror text and a period piece. Told in exquisite visual and auditory detail—from the script written in Middle English to the painstakingly crafted costumes and set pieces—the story is simultaneously transporting and familiar. In the film's first scene, devout, Calvinist Christians William, Catharine, and their children: Thomasin, Caleb, Mercy, Jonas and the infant, Samuel, are banished from their New England plantation, in the aftermath of William's prideful, slanderous testimony against the Church. They venture out into the unforgiving wilderness, led by their faith in God—and by William—and settle on the edge of a vast, formidable forest. After establishing a homestead, things quickly and inevitably go to hell when a witch who inhabits the forest begins wreaking havoc on the family, kidnapping baby Sam, spoiling the crops, turning

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[6] McWeeny, Drew. *Metacritic.* http://www.metacritic.com/movie/the-witch/critic-reviews

family members against one another, and eventually, provoking the total dissolution of the family unit into a terrifying bloodbath.

Patriarchal power structures pulse at the heart of the film, and push the narrative—as well as the film's themes—forward. To understand how patriarchy functions within the film itself, it is necessary to more fully explore how the abject functions as gendered within patriarchy. Rina Arya writes,

> 'Abjection' describes an experience…[which] threatens the subject's sense of self…it exists between two states, where it cannot be discretely separated from the subject (as an object would be able to) and where it lurks object-like but without becoming an object…[the abject] impresses upon the subject's stability, causing the subject to feel vulnerable because its boundaries are under threat. (4)

She continues,

> Fear of the other is central to abjection…the fear of this other stems from with in and is a deep-rooted fear of the other-in-the-self that we want to expel…the fear of the other may be displaced on to individuals and groups in society who are on the fringes, and are stigmatized because their differences are not understood. They are seen to represent a threat…they have been rejected by mainstream society because of the alleged threat that they represent in their status as 'other' and 'abject', which points to the social (and not just psychic) dimension of abjection. (7)

In structures of social power, fear of the abject manifests in fear of the 'other'—that which is seen as different and dangerous, and therefore relegated to a lower status in society. Historically, in systems of patriarchal power, women—man's sexual 'other'—are, as Kristeva puts it, "a divisive factor; essential for reproduction, they nevertheless endanger the ideal norms of the agnatic group" (77)". For Kristeva, menstrual blood, as well as other physical symbols of woman's sexual difference can be interpreted as "symbolic equivalent[s]" (77) of the conflict between genders under patriarchy. According to writer Anne Peterson, historically, there have been several ways of maintaining patriarchal power structures—the most significant of which has

been religion, “which uses the threat of the great unknown afterlife as a motivation to hedge accepted mores and practices of a society.” (Peterson, 3) Kristeva would agree, as she argues,

> Biblical impurity is permeated with the tradition of defilement; in that sense, it *points to* but does not *signify* an autonomous force that *can* be threatening for divine agency. (91)

According to Kristeva, Christian practice has long performed the regulation of women, placing the burden of impurity and defilement on women, largely as a result of their sexual difference. She writes,

> [Female] power…*might* become autonomous evil but *is not*, so long as the hold of subjective and social symbolic order endures. Biblical impurity is thus already a *logicizing* of what departs from the symbolic, and for that very reason it prevents it from being actualized as demonic evil So a logicizing inscribes the demonic in a more abstract and also more moral register as a potential for guilt and sin. (91)

Thus, in religious history, female power must always be suppressed, monitored, done away with, in order to prevent the sexual difference from actualizing itself as a force that would subvert—and possibly destroy—patriarchy. Women are posited as brimming with evil, with the devil: they are seen as abject. According to many theorists, including Kristeva and Creed, the Old Testament fable of Adam and Eve often serves as a crucial example of this, establishing a narrative which directly posits woman as not only ‘other,’ but as an “asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable” (Kristeva, 73) obstacle in the path of man’s search for purity. Kristeva argues that “the brimming flesh of sin belongs, of course, to both sexes; but its root and basic representation is nothing other than feminine temptation” (126). She continues,

> The story of the fall sets up a diabolical otherness in relation to the divine. Adam is no longer endowed with the composed nature of paradisiac man, he is torn by covetousness since the serpent is its master, consuming

> desire for food since the apple is its object. He must protect himself from that sinful food that consumes him and that he craves. (127)

More specifically—and relevant to an analysis of *The Witch*—Kristeva roots this particular brand of religious regulation directly in the evolution of Western Christianity, and the New Testament's shift in rhetoric to one dealing with internalized sin. In the early books of the Bible, sin and the devil can be seen as external to humans—visible, tangible threats in the form of a snake, for example. In the New Testament, however,

> Interiorization of abjection…is brought about through an expedient that takes over Levitical abominations but changes their location. That expedient is *oralization,* which the New Testament will try to rehabilitate, render guiltless, before inverting the pure/impure dichotomy into an inside/outside one…'There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man' (Marck:15)…The emphasis is henceforth placed on the inside/outside boundary, and that threat comes no longer from outside but from within. (Kristeva, 114)

Via religion, "purity or impurity are thus situated in relation to cult…a Law, a reason" (Kristeva, 91). Furthermore,

> The place and law of the One [society, order] do not exist without a *series of separations* that are oral, corporeal, or even more generally material…the taboo implied by the pure/impure distinction organizes differences, shaping and opening an articulation that we must indeed call metonymic, within which, if he maintains himself there, man has a share in the sacred order. (Kristeva, 94-95)

In other words, in the New Testament, the abject—once an outside, tangible threat to human existence—becomes a threat from within, related to notions of inner purity/impurity. Through the cult of religion, this notion becomes codified into a set of rules, regulations, Laws, that set about creating a system by which, if man functions correctly, he can avoid damnation by his own inner impurity. To connect this back to gender, and the Adam and Eve fable, Creed elaborates,

> What position does woman come to hold in relation to the definition of abjection as an inside/outside conflict? There are two ways of interpreting sin. One is in relation to God's will: the other in relation to the desire of the flesh...In my view, the definition of sin/abjection as something which comes from *within* opens up the way to position woman as deceptively treacherous. She may appear pure and beautiful on the outside but evil may, nevertheless, reside within. It is this stereotype of feminine evil--beautiful on the outside/corrupt within—that is so popular within patriarchal discourses about woman's evil nature. (42)

This particular moment in Western Christianity is exactly the one in which *The Witch* is located—in Calvinist Christianity and the idea of the "Elect." As Peterson so aptly explains,

> By the 17th century—the era that serves as the setting for *The Witch*—Puritans had exchanged the material laws of the Old Testament for the more spiritual, and frustratingly amorphous, ideas of Calvinism, including the idea of "The Elect." You didn't arrive at salvation by following rules (or tithing to the Catholic Church, or purchasing 'indulgences') but through *Predestination*, or the notion that God had preordained who would go to heaven, even before birth. Somewhat inconveniently, that knowledge—who was elect, and who was not—was available only to God. As a result, Calvinists spent their entire lives wondering, often with great psychological anguish: *Am I elect?* The only indication of one's predestination was one's behavior: if you are inclined towards the behaviors of the saved, the circular logic went, then you are saved. Any yearning or curiosity about the abject was not just a sin, but evidence of one's own lack of salvation. (3-4)

"You can see how this [Calvinism, the Elect] created a deep and abiding pathology around objects of abjection", Peterson explains, and this logic is omnipresent in *The Witch*—especially in the context of gender as it functions within the story .

Caleb's character, in particular, exemplifies the existential terror upon which the religious existence of Calvinist Christians rests. "What is thy sin?" William demands of Caleb early on in the film. "Adam's sin…and a corrupt nature, dwelling within me", Caleb dutifully replies. Throughout the film, Caleb's pressing fear that he may be predestined for hell rears its head again and again—he is desperate to know if the original sin (Adam, Eve, the Garden of Eden) he was born into means he

is forever doomed. Especially after the disappearance of the unbaptized baby Sam, Caleb's morbid curiosity about the workings of inner sin and the afterlife spirals into intense fear: specifically, fear that he, too, may be bound for damnation. As the story progresses, Caleb's existential terror is made manifest—first, in the way in which he gazes, guiltily, at Thomasin's almost-exposed breast as she sleeps, and later, when he is seemingly punished for his lustful nature. After Caleb engages in sexual intercourse with the witch (a scene which will be explored in greater detail shortly), he is found "naked as sin," and later dies, apparently in the throes of orgasm, after screaming "sin, sin!" and vomiting up a rotten apple. Obviously, the film draws heavily here on the story of original sin, and transforms it out of mere Calvinist neurosis into a horrifying, literal manifestation.

Before going further, a brief exploration of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theory is necessary here. Many theorists, Creed and Kristeva included, turn to Freud's theory of female castration, and male castration anxiety, to understand and problematize notions of sexual difference as related to patriarchal power structures. Creed writes,

> Woman is not, by her very nature, an abject being. Her representation in popular discourses as monstrous is a function of the ideological project of the horror film--a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other. (83)

Indeed, this ideological project has served to justify the oppression of woman on the basis of her sexual difference throughout history—indeed, Freudian theory dictates that "woman terrifies because her genitals appear castrated...permanently determin[ing] the boy's relations to women: horror of the mutilated creature or

triumphant contempt for her" (Creed, 115). Creed focuses on Lacan's rewriting of Freud, and explains that

> [Lacan] places even greater emphasis on the notion of woman's castration. In Lacanian theory it is woman's 'lack' which produces the penis as the mark of human fullness and the phallus as symbolic presence...It is because woman is 'castrated' that she is seen to represent 'lack' in relation to the symbolic order while man inherits the right to represent this order. (110)

Thus, according to Lacan, woman has been historically and systematically disempowered on the basis of her literal lack of a phallus, which then translates into a more metaphorical lack of (phallic) power in patriarchy. Creed, however, puts forth an alternate argument, based on the notion of woman as *castrator*, rather than *castrated.* She writes,

> Freud put forward a number of theories to support his view that woman's genitals appear castrated rather than castrating. Viewed from a different perspective, each of these theories supports--and frequently with more validity—the argument that woman's genitals appear castrating. (110)

Creed raises the question of another view: the "possibility that it is man who constructs woman as a castrator" (121). She argues that Freud's analysis of castration anxiety is inadequate, and makes the claim that in fact, "man's fear...is based on irrational fears about the deadly powers of the vagina" (121). She writes,

> Rather than consider men's dread of the imaginary castrating woman, Freud takes refuge in his theory of woman's castration. While he acknowledges that it is man's 'generalized dread of women' that leads to the setting up of taboos, he concludes that this dread has nothing to do with woman's possible powers—real or imagined. Instead, he explains man's fears in terms of woman's lack of power. (121)

An examination of the woman-as-castrator archetype is crucially important to Creed's theories of the monstrous feminine. The figure of the castrating woman shows up repeatedly in horror texts and, according to Creed, serves to highlight male castration anxiety. As Peterson points out, the castrating female directly represents male fears:

she is woman's "ideological threat transformed into physical abjection...The horror of women gaining power—and, by extension, threatening patriarchy" (5). Indeed, as Kristeva explores in her work, "castration fear plays on a collapse of gender boundaries" (Kristeva, 54), further suggesting that castration fear in men is, at its heart, a fear of a loss of power, and that the woman-as-castrator figure symbolically represents a woman who usurps male phallic power to disrupt the symbolic order. Creed believes that the woman as castrator figure is one of the most powerful, and common, representations of the monstrous feminine in film (Creed, 122), and explains,

> There is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as the 'toothed-vagina'—the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called 'phallic mother,' a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch.'[7] (1)

Peterson corroborates this notion, when she argues that the ideological threat woman poses to patriarchy often

> Takes the form of an *actual witch*, her feminine features (breasts, hips, ass) exaggerated to the point of monstrosity. Her pointed nose, like medusa's hair, is a physical manifestation of castration anxiety: she's stolen the phallus and connected it to her body! (Peterson, 5)

Thus, we can begin to see the ways in which manifestations of woman in the horror genre mirror her ideological threat to patriarchy, and the psychosexual anxiety she induces in men within patriarchal power structures. The figure of the witch, both generically, and more specifically, within *The Witch* exemplifies these trends, and I shall now further explore her character.

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[7] Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, pp. 73.

2. The Witch

Creed writes, “there is one incontestably monstrous role in the horror film that belongs to woman—that of the witch”, who she defines as “a familiar female monster; she is invariably represented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts” (2). Creed continues on to argue that the “representation of the witch [in the horror film] continues to foreground her essentially sexual nature. She is usually depicted as a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil” (76). The witch, as a figure of power in horror, seemingly derives that power directly from her presumed sexual difference—one that manifests itself in evil, deviant female sexuality. Her role as sexual other is rooted in the long-established tradition of demonizing the female reproductive system, and locating it as a source of potential evil and danger to society. Indeed, according to Creed, “from classical to Renaissance times the uterus was frequently drawn with horns to demonstrate its supposed association with the devil” (43). For Creed, woman’s “ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world and the great system of birth, decay and death.” Indeed, this logic follows to establish the archetype of monstrous feminine as an abject figure, primarily because

> She threatens the symbolic order. The monstrous feminine draws attention to the ‘frailty of the symbolic order through her evocation of the natural, animal order and its terrifying associations with the passage all human beings must inevitably take from birth through life to death. (Creed, 83)

We can see then, that the female reproductive system, in establishing her as closer to the animal world, and farther from the symbolic order—and thus, threatening to it—locates woman as abject by virtue of her sexual difference and reproductive

abilities. Turned monstrous, that sexual difference endows woman with the power to undermine and destroy symbolic order—namely, patriarchy. This well fits the description of the witch as

> An abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community. The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her 'feminine' nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature. (Creed, 76)

The figure of the witch in *The Witch* fits all these descriptions to an almost perfect degree. Throughout the film, she serves as the proverbial castrating figure both literally and figuratively, targeting both the actual genitals, and more abstractly, the social power of the male figures in the film.

The witch in *The Witch* is established thoroughly as deeply connected with nature—specifically, with the dark, foreboding woods that the family settles on the edge of at the beginning of the film. Throughout the film, the woods come to visually imply the vast, unknowable darkness of the female vagina—sound cues assist the audience in making this connection, as every time the woods are shown on screen, an ominous, dissonant chorus of female voices rises to hair-raising degrees. The audience is almost immediately presented with the information that these woods house the witch, who "lives in a house where she hides her 'filthy secrets' in dark secret places which suggest the evil womb of the abject mother"[8] (Creed, 77). In direct congress with Kristeva and Creed's arguments regarding woman's presumed primordial association with nature, the woods serve to represent deviant female

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[8] Tansley, Rebecca. "Argento's Mothers: matriarchal monsters, maternal memories." Unpublished diss: University of Auckland, 1988, pp. 26.

power; thus when, at the beginning of the film, William, the father, declares "we will conquer this wilderness; it shall not consume us," the conclusion may be drawn that this conflict between man and wild nature ultimately serves as a metaphor for conflict between patriarchy and female power.

According to Creed, "the central reason for the persecution of witches was morbid interest in the witch as 'other' and a fear of the witch/woman as an agent of castration" (74). Almost immediately, the witch is established as a literal castrating figure, when she kidnaps the infant Samuel, castrates him, and then murders him—after which she bathes in his blood, rubs it on her "broomstick" and uses it to bring herself to orgasm, and then literal flight. Important to note is that this blood-soaked incident takes place under a full moon, which, according to Creed, represents a crucial connection between nature and the female reproductive system. Kristeva writes that "blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection" (59). Creed elaborates on this when she writes, "the association between blood and the moon is, however, more complex than this...the moon...and woman's cycle—move through stages in which the old is shed and the new reborn...woman sheds and renews her blood" (64). The process by which the figure of the witch—not only portrayed as physically monstrous, but sexually monstrous as well—achieves her deviant orgasm directly associates deviant female sexuality with evil, sin and death, and posits woman as bringer of death as well as life. The witch's deviant female organs take life rather than giving it, and, in a monstrous display of inverted motherhood, she ingests infant blood *into,* rather than

out of, her reproductive organs for the purpose of achieving orgasm rather than birth. The orgasm results in flight, drawing a further connection between deviant female sexuality and mystical, evil powers.

The witch targets and castrates Caleb in a slightly more abstracted, though no less impactful way, one that thematically connects well to ideas of the *vagina dentata*, or, the toothed, castrating vagina. According to Creed, the "toothed vagina represents [the threat] associated with the deadly genitals of woman" (109), and nowhere in the story is this more apparent than in the manner in which the witch castrates and kills Caleb. Caleb's lustful nature is made known to the audience throughout the film, and it is that nature which the witch preys upon in order to utilize her power and decimate Caleb's budding masculinity and growth into the patriarchal power structure. When Caleb becomes lost in the woods, the audience is presented with clearly gendered imagery, as Caleb, armed with a long rifle (phallic symbol of his masculinity), fights his way through the underbrush, climbing deeper and deeper into the maw of the feminine unknown. Creed writes briefly on visual motifs associated with the vagina dentata, one of which is the "barred and dangerous entrance", similar to that in the "'Sleeping Beauty' story, and its variants, [which] provides a perfect illustration of this theme. The suitors who wish to win Briar Rose must first penetrate the hedge of thorns that bars their way" (107). Creed argues that "the vagina dentata also points to the duplicitous nature of woman, who promises paradise in order to ensnare her victims" (109), and indeed, the witch seduces Caleb in the form of a beautiful, hyper-sexualized woman. She figuratively castrates Caleb by sleeping with him, literally

consuming his penis with her vagina, by means of which she then possess him with witchcraft and causes his death. Creed writes,

> The myth about woman as castrator...clearly points to male fears and fantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole, which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces...the mouth of hell—a terrifying symbol of woman as the 'devil's gateway'. (106)

The interaction between Caleb and the witch is indeed significant in that it symbolizes the vagina dentata, the devouring vagina, and man's fear that the vagina as woman's locus of power could literally consume him—and, less literally, castrate his power and consume patriarchy. As Anne Peterson argues,

> It's no mistake that the witch takes the two male children--the bearers of the next generation of male rule—and literally cuts off the penis of one and sexually decimates the other. (5)

The conflict between the witch and the family is a conflict between two types of power—the power of deviant, noncompliant women, and the structural power of patriarchy.

The symbolic castration of William—i.e., the usurping of his power—is perhaps the most complicated to unpack. Established quickly as the head of the family as contextualized by the religious, patriarchal power structure in which the film is socially rooted, William is also posited throughout the film as a sort of adopted-religious leader for the family after they are cast out of their plantation. Frequent visual allusions to Jesus in William's positioning and physical behavior—such as chopping wood in a white, toga-like robe, seated at the head of the table with his hands raised, a-la The Last Supper, etc.—serve to cement William as the ultimate symbol of religious, patriarchal power: he is the leader who has led his flock outside the boundaries of society, into abjection. Throughout the film, as a

direct result of the havoc the witch's power wreaks upon the family and farm, William's success as a father and leader is consistently undermined, and he repeatedly fails in his masculine duties. Creed writes that

> During the European witch trials of recent history [the witch] was accused of the most hideous crimes: cannibalism, murder, castration of male victims and the advent of natural disasters such as storms, fires and the plague. (2)

The witch in the film resorts to almost all of these measures—namely, castration, kidnapping, murder, crop failure and empty animal traps—to undermine the stability of the family unit through fear and failure, thus chipping slowly away at William's power as their leader. At one point, Thomasin wildly accuses her father of only being able to succeed at chopping wood, screaming, "You let mother be thy master, you cannot bring the crops to yield, you cannot hunt", implying that the family's slow descent into chaos stems directly from William's own masculine insecurities and failings. Of course, all this failure stems directly from the witch, a "malevolent, destructive, monstrous figure whose constant aim is destruction of the symbolic order" (Creed, 77), and the witch certainly seeks to destroy the patriarchal power system upon which the symbolic order rests. She exists, as an abject figure, to "highlight the 'fragility of the law'...on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction" (Creed, 10), and plays and preys upon that boundary throughout the film. In the end, driven to near madness by this, William locks Thomasin and the twins in the barn, in a direct callback to the Salem Witch Trials and man's blind drive to protect social stability as he is reminded of his tenuous hold on power and "the fragility of the symbolic order" (Creed, 47). At the very bottom of his descent into powerlessness, behaving erratically, and stripped of his sense of any sort of social stability, William laments, "Oh my god, I

am false," and weeps uncontrollably about the fate of his family, begging, "save thy children...I beg thee, Christ...Why hast thou damned my family?" This marks a drastic one-eighty from the prideful, confident William the audience is introduced to at the beginning of the film—the same man who initially chose to take his family out of the safety of the plantation on the basis of his own pride and self-confidence. Finally, after being metaphorically castrated by the witch (who takes his power and appropriates it into her own), William is killed by Black Philip—later shown to be the devil. He dies penetrated by the goat's formidable horns—a symbol of more successful masculinity and male virility—and is buried in the massive woodpile that has come to represent all his masculine failings and frustrations throughout the film. His masculinity, status as a power figure and, on a larger scale, the patriarchal structure of the family (as a microcosm of society) itself are targeted and destroyed—castrated by the devouring, deviant and sexually different powers of the witch.

3. A Mother's Love

Kristeva devotes much of her work to exploring the role of the maternal body in understandings of the abject and abjection. According to her,

> Abjection preserves, what existed in the archaism of preobjectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be...an Other who precedes me and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody. (10)

In other words,

> All individuals experience abjection at the time of their earliest attempts to break away from the mother. She [Kristeva] sees the mother--child relation as one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it. Because of the 'instability of the symbolic function' in relation to this most crucial area—'the prohibition placed on the maternal body'...Kristeva argues that the maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires. (Creed, 11)

Inherent in this desire to reject the maternal body is the influence of patriarchy on the subject, as patriarchy posits the mother as signifying "the period of the semiotic which the paternal symbolic constructs as 'abject'" (Creed, 38). Essentially, the maternal body symbolically represents a return to an amorphous, pre-subject existence, which has historically been established by patriarchal power structures to constitute abjection. The subconscious desire to return to that comfort, in conflict with the memories of violent separation from that same stage at birth, create a complicated discourse around the maternal body: the "desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body" (Kristeva, 54). The maternal body is both fetishized and demonized within structures of patriarchy, and this confusion weaves its way throughout *The Witch* as the film

grapples with family dynamics. For Creed, the castrating mother "is central to a number of horror texts. Her perversity is almost always grounded in possessive, dominant behavior towards her offspring, particularly the male child" (139).

While Catharine—the mother in *The Witch*—does not necessarily fulfill the archetype of the castrating mother in the horror genre, it is still well worth exploring her role in the family unit as one of abjection. Deeply religious, and obviously devoted to her children, Catharine begins to fall apart at the seams after the disappearance and presumed death of Sam. Sam's disappearance represents a sort of violent, re-separation from the maternal body, and can be read to indicate a further push of Catharine's maternal body into abjection. The loss of her children—first Sam, then Caleb—leads to a dissolution of her identity as a mother, an identity which begins to take on a truly abject nature. She ultimately loses her faith, and laments, "I have become as Job's wife, I know it," speaking to her inability to find the devout, unquestioning identity she once clung to. Catharine's despair is inherently gendered, linked to her role as mother, and in a final monologue towards the end of the film, she claims, "I cannot ever feel that same measure of love again." Robbed of a certain destiny, Catharine manifests in many ways into the "psychotic monster"—the unfairly (symbolically) castrated woman—that Creed references when she writes,

> Woman is depicted as castrated either literally or symbolically. Her literal castration is depicted in films in which she is usually a victim, such as the slasher film, where her body is repeatedly knifed until it resembles a bleeding wound. In other horror films, woman is transformed into a psychotic monster because she has been symbolically castrated, that is, she feels she has been robbed unjustly of her rightful destiny. (122)

Catharine refuses to relinquish her dead children: this theme is first symbolized in the scene in which she climbs into Caleb's open grave and wraps herself around his body,

refusing to let go—and then, later, when she is visited by the specters of Caleb and Sam in the middle of the night. The images of her dead children—undoubtedly further work of the witch—manipulate her desire to reassume her children and her sense of motherhood, and provide a means of coaxing her across the border of abjection into engaging in black magic and communication with the dead. Thus, Catharine's symbolic castration proves a mechanism through which she is lost into abjection.

This scene holds further interest when placed in comparison with some of Creed's further writings on the archetype of the castrating mother. Creed writes,

> The association of the mother with birds of prey who attack children is not unique to *Psycho*...Harpies abducted children and carried them into the underworld. The term is still in current usage. Hitchcock draws connections between women and birds in a later film, *The Birds,* in which the birds may also be understood as fetish objects, not of the castrated/phallic, but of the castrating mother. (144)

This comparison may seem far-fetched, but Creed well supports her argument, as she elaborates,

> Like birds, women appear to peck daintily but in reality they are voracious consumers. It is the oral mother, the incorporating, devouring mother who threatens the son. Like that of a bird, woman's appetite is deceptive...Woman as monstrous is associated with bodily appetites, cruel eyes, a pecking beak...Insofar as devouring beaks, the beak should also be seen as a sign of the castrating mother—the mother who threatens to incorporate the child both psychically and physically. (144)

Catharine's abject desire to reassume her dead children may be seen as indicative of a devouring nature—and if this comparison does not in of itself hold enough credence, the audience is immediately afterwards confronted with an image of Catharine bending to breast feed the dead baby Sam; who, it turns out, is nothing more than a large black crow, tearing bloodily at Catharine's nipple as she laughs

hysterically. While Catharine may not exemplify the typical "castrating, punishing parent" (Creed, 148) featured in films like *Psycho*, her gendered role as mother seems to be under constant scrutiny throughout the film—and that same gendered, feminine role is what ultimately links her directly to the realm of abjection, a theme repeatedly explored throughout this paper. Later, Catharine does turn into the more typical, demented, castrating mother of the horror genre, as she accuses and physically attacks Thomasin, screaming, "Proud slut...did you not think I saw thy sluttish looks to him [Caleb], bewitching his eyes, you whore! And thy father next!!! You took them from me!" This scene harkens directly to Kristeva's argument that "abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory." (Kristeva, 5) This scene—like many in *Psycho,* as well as in *Carrie*—seems to present us with "a graphic, explicit, disturbing image of the mother carrying out the law, enforcing retribution...awaken[ing] in the spectator an infantile fear of the castrating, punishing parent" (Creed, 148).

Creed believes that "the phantasy of the castrating mother undermines Freud's theories that woman terrifies because she is castrated and that it is the father who alone represents the agent of castration within the family" (Creed, 151), which is true—but specific to *The Witch,* Catharine's ultimate attack on Thomasin also points to the ways in which female 'otherness' can be passed from female to female. Catharine, in experiencing abjection, turns her rage towards Thomasin, attempting to posit *her* as the ultimate, abject other. As Butler writes,

> The abject [note omitted] designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the

> subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which--and by virtue of which--the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. (Arya, 8)[9]

Catharine's behavior exemplifies the ways in which human subjects attempt to use identification with and against the abject, in order to constitute a sense of reason and identity in the world. Her world having imploded, Catharine attempts to ascribe some sort of sense to the events unfolding by using Thomasin as the scapegoat, the embodiment of the realm of abjection into which Catharine and her family have slipped.

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[9] Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'. Routledge,* 1993, pp. 3.

4. Monstrous Potential

In a description of *Witch,* Anne Peterson writes of the film's historical leanings as

> [Drawing] heavily on myriad stories, testimonies and reports from the era to craft the narrative...each of which would have been circulated as a means for adults to tell children, and children to regulate other children, and adults to caution other adults about the dangers not only of leaving the fold--and, by extension, the status quo--but also of the monstrous potential of the teenage girl, in this case, Thomasin. (4)

From the get-go, Thomasin has a total lack of agency in the society in which she is a member: her gender, in combination with her age, render her 'other' and 'sinful' by nature, according to the rules and norms of the religion to which her family subscribes, and which dictates her life. Despite Thomasin's apparent commitment to her family and her religion, constant tension surrounds her place in the family, stemming directly from her imminent sexual maturity. Fairly early on in the film, Catharine and William discuss selling Thomasin off to another family, in order to reap a bride price and mitigate the economic trouble the family has fallen into. Catharine argues, "She has begot the sign of her womanhood": and, indeed, Thomasin's impending womanhood is a vital theme throughout the film: in her breasts, straining against a dress which seems too small for her, in Caleb's lustful glances, in the consistent allusions to menstruation in various scenes involving blood which "spatters, never splashes, in a way that suggests the drip of menstruation" (Peterson, 5-6), and in the ever present imagery of the woods, "aligned with the unknowable, dark expanse of the vagina" (Peterson, 5-6). Thomasin is rendered abject by virtue of her maturing body and sexual difference, which, as has already

been established, “place her on the side of nature rather than the symbolic order...linked to the abject through her body” (Creed, 47). Indeed, as Sheena Vachhani writes,

> The other within is unknowable but also intimate and connected to what makes us anxious about our bodily selves (Betterton, 2006)[10]. Such feelings manifest in the awareness of particular organs over others, for example, locating and fixing our attention on certain areas of the body such as the womb or breast. (649)

Female puberty, like pregnancy, is

> A condition that deviates from ‘normal’ (Gatrell, 2011[11]; Young, 2005[12])…represent[ing] the disintegration between self/other boundaries, a central aspect of the monstrous…[those bodies] become monstrous by being ‘unreliable’ (Gatrell, 2011; Makela, 2005[13]). (Vachhani, 652)

Thus, Thomasin’s character is defined by her “monstrous potential” (Peterson, 4)—the uncertainty and danger brought on by her developing body and femininity.

Thomasin is consistently victimized by her family, and more largely, by the societal constructs she has been born into. Baby Sam is initially lost under Thomasin’s watch, and a distraught Catharine accuses her daughter of being somehow guilty in his disappearance. This marks the beginning of a pattern of familial interaction in which Thomasin is rendered powerless over and over again. She is regularly accused of sin as directly related to her gender identity, such as in the case of Catharine’s silver cup. When the cup disappears from the house,

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[10] Betterton, R. “Promising monsters: pregnant bodies, artistic subjectivity, and maternal imagination”, *Hypatia,* Vol. 21, No. 1, 2006, pp. 80-100.
[11] Gatrell, C. “Managing the maternal body: a comprehensive review and transdisciplinary analysis”, *International Journal of Management Reviews,* Vol. 13, No. 1, 2011, pp. 97-112.
[12] Young, I.M., *On Female Body Experience—‘Throwing Like a Girl’ and Other Essays,* Oxford University Press, 2005.
[13] Mäkelä, L. “Pregnancy and leader-follower dyadic relationships: a research agenda”, *Equal Opportunities International,* Vol. 24, Nos. 3-4, 2005, pp. 50-73.

Catharine immediately accuses Thomasin of stealing or losing it, snapping, “I’ve caught ye trifling with it before”; arguably (within the context of the harsh asceticism of Calvinism) implying that Thomasin’s interest in the cup is, at heart, a sinful lust for pretty things. Thomasin’s later admission of a desire for pretty things at the final climax of the film lends credence to this accusation—but still, the fact remains that it is a gendered attack, from mother to daughter. Thomasin’s gender and age identity makes her the obvious sinner, in the eyes of the family unit. When William (the actual culprit in the cup’s disappearance) attempts to defend Thomasin, he is met with admonishment from his wife: “What is amiss in this farm? It’s not natural!” implying that Thomasin’s place as the ‘other’ within her family, and as general scapegoat for sin *is* natural, and not to be questioned.

In the face of her disenfranchisement, Thomasin’s desire for agency visibly builds over the course of the film: at one point, she snaps, “I hate that pity; I need it not” at Caleb, a surprising moment of defiance from a girl growing up in a religion which rests upon pious guilt. Thomasin goes further in her quest for agency within the family unit when she pretends to be a witch in order to exert her will over her younger sister, Mercy, notably claiming, “I *am* a witch, and I’ll make any man or thing else vanish that I like!” An exasperated Thomasin recognizes that witchcraft (or the pretense of it) marks an opportunity to get what she wants—for once—in the family; but on a deeper level, this moment shows the developing connection between witchcraft and female power and agency outside the confines of a restrictive society. Consequently, Thomasin’s commitment to religion seems to ebb as the film progresses, and as she struggles to maintain a sense of place in her family. She

appears increasingly ambivalent towards her family's religiosity—where she is shown, alone, in dedicated prayer at the beginning of the film, as the film goes on she ceases performing practices of Christianity other than in the presence of her family.

Thomasin falls prey to accusations of witchcraft in the wake of Caleb's death: an accusation tied directly to her already disempowered social status. Despite frequent, obvious instances of the twins—especially Mercy, a younger, pre-pubescent girl—communicating with Black Philip (a historical indicator of witchcraft), Thomasin is still suspected first. As discussed, Thomasin's age and gender characteristics render her suspicious, and Mercy—still too young to be threatening—innocent. It is important to note here, though, that of the two twins, it is Mercy, the female, who is much more obviously engaged in questionable behavior and potential engagement with the supernatural, rather than her brother—yet another indicator of woman's (socially) inherent association with the 'other', the abject, even from birth and early childhood. When Thomasin protests her innocence, William refuses to listen to her, and drags her from the house, demanding truth—and finally, we see Thomasin snap. Vachhani writes that "One way to rearticulate the symbolic order is to examine how those designated as vulnerable in hegemonic culture are often more powerful in challenging it" (657), and challenge it, Thomasin does. She breaks fully out of socially-acceptable modes of behavior for a young woman of her time, aggressively confronting William on the basis of his own sins and decrying her own unfair treatment—specifically, the blame she's been forced to assume for William's own misdoings. Kristeva writes that

> Woman is constructed as possessed when she attacks the symbolic order, highlights its weakness, plays on its vulnerabilities; specifically, she

> demonstrates that the symbolic order is a sham built on sexual repression and the sacrifice of the mother. (41)

Indeed, at this point in the film we see an almost literal play-by-play of Kristeva's words in Thomasin's infuriated break from custom. Thomasin directly targets William's failed manhood, shouting, "You let mother by thy master, you cannot bring the crops to yield, you cannot hunt—is that truth enough?!" Thomasin seems aware of William's metaphorical castration throughout the film, and hones in on the visible weakness of the symbolic order that William enforces. "You can do nothing but cut wood!" Thomasin accuses, and, striking her across the face, William screams back, "Bitch!" "You cannot hear me!" Thomasin cries, seemingly realizing the extent to which her position in the family (and greater society) renders her voice irrelevant. This scene lends itself interestingly to Kristeva's argument that

> The pitiful power of the feminine, however, be it drive or murder, is in fact unleashed only with the help of masculine degradation or bankruptcy--a bankruptcy of the father and manly authority...is it from this feminine, defined as the other of sublimatory area, that scription, in a more ambiguous fashion, draws its inspiration? (Kristeva, 169)

Thomasin seems to grow in strength as a direct result of the dissolution of the paternal symbolic, or, as Kristeva refers to it, masculine degradation or bankruptcy. This comparison raises interesting questions about the arguably feminist awakening of Thomasin's power and agency at the end of the film, which I will address shortly.

5. Re-Birth

Thomasin undoubtedly attempts to break from the symbolic order of patriarchy, but her separation from her family and society takes on a much more nuanced aspect when we examine the break between mother and daughter. When Catharine comes at Thomasin in her final assault, all the accusations she levels at Thomasin are (as discussed earlier) in direct conversation with Thomasin's sexuality. Catharine's own feminine role (that of the mother) has been completely compromised: seemingly (for her), by Thomasin's own hand. A subtle theme throughout the film is that of the usurping of one woman's power by another: Thomasin is accused by Catharine of being guilty of baby Sam's disappearance, and later, at the end of the film, Catharine screams at Thomasin (of Sam, Caleb and William), "You took them from me!" Arguably, the dynamic between mother and daughter in this film (especially towards the end) is marked by Catharine's fear of her own femininity and female identity being usurped by Thomasin's expanding feminine vitality. Indeed, the relationship devolves into a literal life-and-death battle, as Catharine tries to strangle Thomasin, in an attempt to take back the life (read: her own female identity) that she believes Thomasin has stolen. Thomasin screams, "I love you, I love you!" and stabs her mother to death preserve her own right to life.

Of the classic horror film *Carrie,* Creed writes,

> This movement--from child to woman and woman to child--is crucial to the film's representation of woman as abject. As Carrie attempts to break away from the maternal entity, she takes on the signs of womanhood. (81)

Like Carrie, Thomasin stabs her mother to death, a "symbolic form of phallic penetration by [the] daughter" (Creed, 82). Both scenes come to a blood-drenched climax with the death of the mother at the hands of the daughter, but in the case of *The Witch,* Thomasin's murderous, self-preserving actions directly constitute her own rebirth as a woman. She emerges, soaked in her mother's blood—"the blood that nourishes the embryo and emphasizes woman's procreative function" (Creed, 83)—in what arguably constitutes what Kristeva describes as "a reconciliation with the maternal body, the body of our origins, [which] is only possible through an encounter with horror, the abject of our culture" (41). This blending of mother and daughter—puberty, menstrual blood, and mother's blood—is worth examining. Kristeva writes,

> Menstrual blood...stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (71)

Creed expands on this analysis of the social context of menstrual blood when she writes,

> In the horror genre...menstrual blood is constructed as a source of abjection: its powers are so great it can transform woman into any one of a number of fearful creatures: possessed child, killer and vengeful witch. (83)

Menstrual blood is thus a physical stand-in for the uncanny, unknowable power of female sexual difference. Transformative and subversive, female blood holds great cultural power, and the blood-drenched battle between mother and daughter manifests this. Thomasin has undoubtedly been transformed—from child to woman, from the symbolic into the abject—through a literal usurpation of her mother's life force. She is reborn as a woman, soaked in her mother's blood—undoubtedly indicative of the menstrual blood associated with her newfound female sexual maturity.

After killing Catharine, Thomasin finds herself completely alone and independent—and as she gazes at the woods, they are visually framed in an entirely new way. The back of Thomasin's head is foregrounded, but the woods are in focus, and framed as up close and immediate, rather than vast and terrifying as they were earlier in the film. Instead, the trees seem almost intimate, familiar, and Thomasin's hair blends with them, symbolizing a new possibility for Thomasin to align herself with the monstrous, feminine power they have come to represent. Thomasin then makes her way into the barn, where Black Philip—whom the audience comes to find is really the Devil in animal form—is waiting for her. Black Philip asks Thomasin, "What dost thou want?" to which she immediately replies, "What canst thou give?" This answer implies that, rather than terror or desperation, what Thomasin really feels is a sense of opportunity. Black Philip replies, "Wouldst thou like the taste of butter, a pretty dress? Wouldst thou like to live...deliciously? Wouldst thou like to see the world?" Without hesitation, Thomasin answers, "Yes." Anne Peterson offers up a compelling argument in favor of a feminist read of this moment, when she writes,

> That Thomasin was tempted by the offer to 'taste butter,' 'have the finest dresses,' and 'travel the world' seems odd today, but all of those experiences are stand-ins for a woman's liberation from the strictures of a Puritan God and patriarchal society. For a woman of Thomasin's time to entertain desires for any of those things was deep and convincing evidence of her damnation...Embracing control of your own body, sexuality or future was tantamount to self-damnation...Today, we call a woman who embraces those things a feminist. (6)

Thomasin is directly asking for power, not in spite of, but in direct relation to, her female body and sexuality—a fact hammered home when she gives her body to the Devil, using her sexuality as a form of power to attain liberation. This moment has

other, more condemning interpretations, as Thomasin perhaps arguably trades one form of sexual oppression for another—but read through a certain lens, the scene carries a strong argument in favor of empowerment. Creed speaks to this dualism:

> The representation of the monstrous feminine in patriarchal signifying practices has a number of consequences for psychoanalytically based theories of sexual difference. On the one hand, those images which define woman as monstrous in relation to her reproductive functions work to reinforce the phallocentric notion that female sexuality is abject. On the other hand, the notion of the monstrous feminine challenges the view that femininity, by definition, constitutes passivity. (151)

Additionally, as Kristeva argues,

> When a woman ventures out in those regions [of abjection] it is usually to gratify, in a very maternal fashion, the desire for the abject that insures the life (that is, the sexual life) of the man whose symbolic authority she accepts...Rarely does a woman tie her desire and her sexual life to that abjection (54).

For Kristeva, a woman's abjection is rarely of her own choosing, or a mark of her own agency—rather, it is symptomatic of her role in the symbolic sexual order. Through this lens, in conversation with Creed's argument, Thomasin's conscious use of her abject body as a means for agency, rather than a passive object of male subjectivity, is arguably extremely feminist—especially when taken in the 17th-century, created world of the film, in which a woman like Thomasin had very few options for agency, and, in terms of her body, had been socially conditioned to be passive and chaste. She subverts social norms to attain liberation, by what means she can—a filmic choice with broader, feminist implications outside the world of the film. A final criticism of this scene may lie in the Devil's male personification—does he not simply represent another symbol of patriarchy? However, in the world the film locates itself in, the Devil was *certainly* a real, male figure. Additionally, despite being male, the Devil in *The Witch* actively works to subvert patriarchal Christianity,

a system which rests upon the oppression of women—and offers up, as an alternate, female liberation (the ultimate horror!). Creed points to horror stories dealing with the Devil as ultimately not “a struggle between the forces of good and evil, God and the devil, [but rather] a struggle between man and woman” (39), and *The Witch* corroborates this in locating the Devil as a source of female freedom from Christian oppression.

Finally, having slept with the Devil and signed his book, Thomasin calmly walks, “naked as sin”, through the forest with Black Philip at her heels, to join a group of witches. All female and all naked, the women are chanting and dancing around a massive fire, armed with their broomsticks (already associated with the dangerous power of the female orgasm). Relevant to this scene is Creed’s argument that horror often “emerge[s] from the fact that woman has broken with her proper feminine role—she has made a ‘spectacle of herself’—put her unsocialized body on display” (42). Creed speaks to the sort of graphic display that confronts audiences of *The Witch* when she writes,

> The possessed female subject is one who refuses to take up her proper place in the symbolic order...The normal state of affairs...is reversed; the dyadic relationship is distinguished not by the marking out of a child’s ‘clean and proper body’ but by a return to the unclean, untrained, unsymbolized body. Abjection is constructed as a rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal, female flesh. (Creed, 38)

The scene is posited as the eerie finale to a horror story, but reads as far from that—rather, this rebellion of “filthy, lustful, carnal female flesh” seems almost a celebration of female freedom, and certainly presents itself in that way to Thomasin. The blood that covers Thomasin’s naked body now inarguably takes on the connotations of sexual maturity and feminine power. Painted in this symbolic

fluid, she ascends into the air with the other witches—presumably in a collective orgasm—without the help of a broomstick, further pointing to the destruction of the symbolic order, manifested in Catharine's death and blood as directly linked to Thomasin's rebirth: menstrual blood, sexual maturity and liberation. The scene is an acknowledgement of sexual difference as the subversive locus of female power.

Conclusion: A Happy Ending?

The horror genre forces audiences to engage with their deepest, most subconscious fears—with the abject. According to Creed, this engagement is an attempt to

> Bring about a confrontation with the abject...in order to finally eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between human and non-human. As a form of modern defilement rite, the horror film attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. (14)

For Creed, the monstrous-feminine complicates this notion, presenting audiences with a different construct in the horror text: one which allows for female characters with some agency, characters who aren't merely passive victims—and predominantly, characters who challenge the patriarchal symbolic. At the same time, however, Creed believes that merely the existence of the monstrous feminine is by no means enough to claim some sort of victory in the face of patriarchy. In fact, she argues that

> The composite image of…[the castrated/proper woman] and [the castrator/deviant woman] is not something that needs to be repressed in order to ensure the workings of patriarchal ideology. On the contrary, such a composite image, in which woman's nature is represented as deceptive and unknowable, is essential to the proper functioning of such an ideology. It is represented continually within different signifying practices such as film, religion, pornography, literature, jokes and colloquial speech. (136)

Additionally, she cites Roger Ebert, who wrote of the modern horror film:

> 'These movies may still be exorcizing demons, but the identity of the demons has changed. Now the 'victim' is the poor, put-upon, traumatized male in the audience. And the demons are the women on the screen.'[14] (Creed, 127)

Creed continues,

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[14] Ebert, Roger. "Why movie audiences aren't safe anymore." *American Film 5: 54-6,* 1981.

> Ebert’s lament suggests that horror films which deal with the female castrator are either reinforcing a view that woman is deadly and dangerous and/or they are playing on the spectator's fascination with the relationship between sex and death. (127-28)

Essentially, the existence of the monstrous-feminine—while a complicating factor for patriarchal structures of power—is not enough to truly challenge them, as it often merely reinforces harmful dichotomies upon which the patriarchy rests. Especially relevant here is the context in which films containing a monstrous-female are made—as with *The Witch,* most horror films are written and directed by men, who work from a place of phallic power. Can any female character, born out of such circumstances, be seen as aligned with feminist thought?

Vachhani has a slightly more optimistic outlook on the monstrous-feminine as a tool for feminists:

> The key question for feminists is whether the female monster could be a reclamation of power, or woman’s ‘power-in-difference’...those designated as a marginalized other are often only able to use already designated subject positions to challenge hegemonic norms.[15] (656)

This notion, that woman-as-other might be able to use—or, in fact, have *only* at her disposal—her difference, as a means to achieve power, lends credence to Thomasin’s rebirth at the end of *The Witch* as a distinctly feminist moment. However, Vachhani seems to support Creed’s thoughts when she writes,

> Rearticulating the monstrous feminine as a positive sign is central to a feminist project only if it redefines sexual difference as the interplay between different sexualities, genders and subjectivities, and breaks with essentialist notions of woman as matter-substance, nature and fluidity. (656-7)

This is all well and good, and certainly a noble task for any committed feminist, but *how* exactly are we to go about rearticulating and reclaiming the monstrous

[15] Thanem, T. *The Monstrous Organization.* Edward Elgar, 2011.

feminine? Here, it is advantageous to turn back to Creed, as well as to Laura Mulvey. Mulvey speaks to the gaze of a spectator in the context of men, but does little to address the ways in which women both internalize and re-appropriate the male gaze for themselves. Scopophilia exists for both parties in an audience—male and female—but rarely in the horror text are women encouraged to identify with something other than the victim. According to Creed,

> When the spectator is encouraged to identify with the victim, an extreme form of masochistic looking is invoked; here the look is confronted by horrific images signifying extreme terror, pain, death. (154)

In this sense, woman-as-spectator to the female victim of a horror film seems tied to the situation Mulvey describes, when she writes:

> It is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies...Woman stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (833-34)

However, Mulvey also explores the subversive potential of the female image on screen, in much the same way as Creed and Kristeva, when she argues that the female image

> Connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of penis, implying a threat of castration…Ultimately the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as…the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. (840)

This statement applies particularly well to Thomasin's character, who dances the line between being sexually pleasing—visually—and exceedingly dangerous. In the case

of characters like Thomasin, and other castrating women on-screen, Creed believes that an analysis of the role of the female spectator is vital. She writes,

> What is the appeal of the horror film to the female spectator? Does she recognize herself in the figure of the monstrous-feminine? To what extent might the female spectator feel empowered when identifying with the female castrator? Does she derive a form of sadistic pleasure from seeing her sexual other humiliated and punished? (155)

Creed believes that "identificatory process are extremely fluid and allow the spectator to switch identification between victim and monster" (Creed, 115), especially when one takes into account the various levels of an audience member's personal agency, general upbringing, and susceptibility to filmic codes—therefore, it stands to reason that women might (and most likely, often do) identify with the monster in horror texts. She cites (and immediately discounts) the argument that women who identify with a castrating, monstrous feminine are identifying with a woman who has been reconstituted as masculine, the possessor of a phallus. By this logic, any female spectator who "derive[s] pleasure from identifying with an aggressive or violent heroine…[has] been contaminated by patriarchy" (155). Of this hypothetical, Creed writes,

> It is only the phallic male spectator who is empowered...This view appears to be based on the argument that only phallic masculinity is violent and that femininity is never violent--not even in the imagination. (155)

Clearly, what is called for is a social reconstitution of femininity as something much more than it exists now—particularly on screen—and in my mind, this can only happen when the female spectator engages with, and embraces, the abject on screen. Kristeva might argue that the female spectator herself becomes abject when delving past the boundary of the symbolic in identifying with the female castrator. Ultimately, this is perhaps one avenue to a feminist interpretation of the horror genre:

female audiences members' identification with the violent, castrating, female abject figure on screen, as a means to reclaim and draw power from woman's very role as 'abject.' Creed writes,

> The feminine imagination is seen as essentially non-violent, peaceful, unaggressive. This is the very argument that patriarchal ideology has used for the past 2,000 years to control women. (156)

Unfortunately unavoidable in this equation is the bottom-line financial politics of the film industry—production is driven by profit, and little else. Audiences do have agency, though, in the manner in which they decode symbols, and in a manner similar to Thomasin's rebellion, female audiences must use what means they have at their disposal to break free of systemic oppression (even if those means are limited, existing only within the context of patriarchy). According to popular postmodernist though, media signs and symbols can be continuously reconstituted and reworked by audiences, serving to reproduce and shift culture at large. By this logic, then, if female audiences en masse can identify with, and support, a female character archetype whose very existence serves to destabilize the patriarchal symbolic, perhaps the male fears and fantasies that gave birth to the monstrous-feminine can be reworked into fodder for feminist fire.

The true monstrosity of the monstrous feminine lies in the threat she poses—the nebulous, threatening existence she maintains along the tenuous boundaries of patriarchy. She is the shadow within those female bodies whom patriarchy has constituted as 'other,' and as such, may indeed serve as a lynchpin in audiences' reconstitution of the patriarchy's own signs and symbols in deconstructing and re-

appropriating systems of male dominance in favor of a non-binary, equitable cultural system of gender relations.

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