

THE SIMPSONS, GENDER ROLES, AND WITCHCRAFT: THE WITCH IN MODERN POPULAR CULTURE

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Summary || This paper analyzes *The Simpsons'* use of the witch to uncover how her construction in this animated series reflects not only the current theoretical work on the witch but also the ambivalence about the role of women in modern American society. This paper posits that the original construction of the witch, as seen in current interpretation of Early Modern pamphlets and cultural artifacts, stemmed from the time period's expectations of gender. Further, *The Simpsons'* incorporation of the witch into its episodes reveals that many of these same gender constraints exist in modern culture.

Keywords || Popular Culture | Witchcraft | *The Simpsons* | Gender Roles | Feminism.

0. Introduction

A young girl, of approximately the age of eight, enters her living room completely decked out in her well-constructed Halloween costume. Wearing her black pointy hat, buckle shoes, black dress, striped socks, and a cape, while carrying the prerequisite wand, both the audience and her friend immediately recognize her as being dressed as a witch. Her friend has always had a crush on her, and he attempts to impress her by complimenting her outfit: «I like your witch costume, Lisa». A look of indignation immediately transforms her face, as she retorts, «I'm not a witch; I'm a Wiccan. Why is it that when a woman is confident and powerful, they call her a witch?» («Treehouse of Horror XIX», 2008)

By now, most readers would recognize the little girl questioning the construction of the witch as none other than Lisa Simpson, from the long-running animated sitcom *The Simpsons*¹. This particular scene stems from the series' annual Halloween episodes, a collection of three vignettes entitled «Treehouse of Horror», and while the recurring characters of *The Simpsons* are allowed to engage in both fantastic and phantasmal scenarios in these episodes, they ultimately do not stray from their traditional roles. Hence, while Lisa takes on the characteristics of Lucy from *Peanuts* in this wonderful parody entitled «It's the Grand Pumpkin Milhouse» (2008), her question is very much in keeping with the values normally attributed to her in the series—that of the outspoken feminist with a thirst for knowledge.

As both the longest-running sitcom and animated series on American television, *The Simpsons* serves as the primary representation of modern American culture, especially as it has functioned as a satirical look at the American middle-class family. As an animated series, the series has always been allowed to take liberties and play with the conventions of a sitcom in order to make its pointed comments concerning modern culture. Yet, it is in the series' incorporation of the fantastic, and the witch in particular, that has allowed it to make its more significant statements regarding sexual politics and gender expectations. The female characters accused of witchcraft or presented as witches not only comment on how the witch is constructed in modern popular culture, but also how issues of gender roles and expectations complicate that construction. For example, casting «The Crazy Cat Lady» as a witch allows the audience to transpose the characteristics normally associated with this character to the idea of «witch». This proves true with the many presentations of the witch throughout the series, whether it is with Marge Simpson, Patty and Selma Bouvier (Marge's sisters), Lisa, or even baby Maggie. *The Simpsons* reflects (and reinforces) the construction of the witch, drawing on the characteristics first associated with it during the

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1 | I say «most readers» due the series' longevity and popularity. As Matthew Henry notes, *The Simpsons* now holds the record as both the longest-running animated primetime program and sitcom in American television history (2007: 273). Additionally, the McCormick Tribune Foundation reported in 2006 that almost a quarter of Americans can name all five members of the Simpson's household. While the report finds this fact disturbing, especially in relation to the questions in which the respondents did not fare as well, the report's findings indicate not only the series' popularity, but also its importance as a cultural artifact. McCormick Tribute Freedom Museum. «Characters from The Simpsons More Well Known to Americans than Their First Amendment Freedoms, Survey Finds», *McCormick Freedom Project*, [3 Dec. 2009], <<http://mccormickfoundation.org/news/2006/pr030106.aspx>>

Early Modern period in conjunction with more recent popular culture references such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Bewitched* (1964-1972). Yet, the series also comments on the gender implications of that image. Therefore, I will be examining the ways in which *The Simpsons* has attempted to answer Lisa's question concerning the role of gender in witchcraft and witch accusations, and propose that the various «answers» posed by the series actually mirror not only current theoretical work on the witch but also reflect the ambivalence about the role of women in modern American society.

1. «I've grown a costume on your face» from «Treehouse of horror XVI»

The third vignette in the 2005 Halloween episode offers perhaps the most conventional representation of the witch in *The Simpsons'* history. For that very reason, it is a good place to begin this analysis, as it portrays the witch according to her most popular construction and presents a theory of the gender question that is also widely-held. The segment opens with Springfield holding a Halloween costume contest. In the crowd, Lisa can be seen dressed as Albert Einstein, Dr. Hibbard as Dracula, Ned Flanders as a flower, and, most notably, little Maggie as a witch (whose costume is only clear from her pointy black hat; otherwise, she is dressed in her traditional blue nightgown). On the steps of the town hall, Mayor Quimby announces a woman who strongly resembles the recurring character widely known as «The Crazy Cat Lady» dressed in a witch's costume as the winner. However, when asked her identity, she is forced to admit that she is not wearing a costume, saying: «I'm a real witch». The town's people, who by the way are in no way shocked by the existence of a witch, are outraged that she has cheated and they rescind her prize—a \$25 gift certificate to Kwik-E-Mart, which its owner Apu readily admits is not enough to purchase anything in the store². In her anger, she casts a spell on everyone who lives in Springfield, forcing them to «become the guise [they] don». Instantaneously, Marge becomes a skeleton, Bart a wolf man, and Grandpa Abe a gorilla. As most in the town are distressed by this turn of events, Lisa as Einstein sets out to find a solution. When Maggie, now dressed in a complete witch's costume, is able to move objects with a spell, Lisa realizes that Maggie has the power to conduct counter-magic and undo the hex. Unfortunately, Maggie has no interest, or understanding, of the real issue at hand, and instead turns everyone into a pacifier—her true desire. The episode ends as she flies off on her broom, witch «dust» surrounding her, and the *Bewitched* theme music playing in the background.

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2 | Note that this slight against the witch, although petty, is deemed important enough to conduct *maleficium*. Sharpe notes that «however trivial the altercation», it could be viewed as the instigation of black magic (1996: 62).

«The Crazy Cat Lady» as a character reveals a great deal about the figure of the witch³. She lives alone and is always depicted with at least one cat attached to her body. I use the word «attached», because she does not hold the cat; instead it appears to hang from various parts of her person. However, it is also a misnomer to use the word «cat», for in nearly every appearance of this character a multitude of cats are attached to her. A freeze-frame of the 2009-2010 opening credits shows at least nine cats hanging from «The Crazy Cat Lady». While the representation of this character plays with the modern stereotype of a «cat lady», or a spinster woman who only has cats to give her love, it is also difficult to dismiss this particular example as representative of the «familiar».

As John Sharpe notes in his *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, the notion of the familiar is perhaps one of the most identifiable characteristics associated with the witch. This familiar, usually in the form of a toad, cat, or dog, was assumed to be a demonic spirit, capable of performing *maleficium* on behalf of the witch (1996: 71). However, it was believed that the familiar was only willing to conduct the *maleficium* in exchange for human food—sometimes in the form of animals such as chickens, but more often in the form of human blood. As Deborah Willis explains, the familiar «would suck greedily from the witch’s mark or teat—sometimes described in great detail as a nipplelike protuberance» (1995: 52). Therefore, to return to «The Crazy Cat Lady», the cats’ attachment to her body can be read as familiars merely feeding upon her blood⁴. This idea is further supported in her representation in «I’ve Grown a Costume on Your Face», as the warts on her face, often used as evidence for a witch’s mark, are much more clearly visible in this episode. As Barbara Rosen explains «This mark [...] gradually becomes the outstanding ‘proof’» of not only the existence of a pact with the devil but that the accused woman is in fact a witch (1991: 17). Hence, *The Simpsons* clearly portrays «the real witch», as portrayed by «The Crazy Cat Lady», as one that is not only easily identifiable as a witch to the modern audience but is also grounded in two of the most important aspects of the Early Modern construction of her—the familiar and the mark.

However, the representation of «The Crazy Cat Lady» also supports one of the common explanations posited to account for witch accusations and why women in particular were the main targets. One analysis of the surviving Early Modern pamphlets depicting the witch trials notes that the accused was most often an «economically marginalized» elderly woman, without the influence of a husband and with a reputation for «doing ill» (Sharpe, 1996: 63). Her age becomes a factor as she has probably outlived her husband, if she had ever married to begin with, and is now unable to support herself financially. She, hence, becomes a burden on her neighbors, as she

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3 | The name of «The Crazy Cat Lady» has been revealed to be Eleanor Abernathy. However, this revelation did not occur until «Springfield Up» (2007). This is the only episode in which her true name is used.

4 | This idea of the feeding of the familiar as indicative of the maternal, especially as discussed in Willis’s *Malevolent Nurture*, will be explored more thoroughly in the discussion of «Easy Bake Coven».

requires their charity in order to survive. Sharpe also states that the accused does not attend church regularly and is often heard scolding or cursing her neighbors (1996: 63). The woman described here is one living outside of normative gender expectations, and, as such, is a threat.

There is perhaps no greater threat in the town of Springfield as «The Crazy Cat Lady». With a given age of 78 and having lived as a single woman for her entire adult life, it is interesting that the series depicts her as not only a «cat lady,» but as a «crazy» one. She is discussed as being mentally ill in numerous episodes; however, the audience learns in «Springfield Up» that this is due to stress. Yet, this stress is caused from having entered into the male-dominated public spheres of law and medicine. By the age of thirty-two she had bonded with her first cat, in a downward spiral of mental illness, to never find a male companion. Most of what she says is unintelligible, and, yet, the few words that are clear are always curses⁵. As Mary E. Wiesner explains, women living without male figures—whether they be husbands or fathers—were «more suspect in the eyes of their neighbors» (2000: 268). While Wiesner refers here to the women accused of witchcraft during the Early Modern era, it is interesting that *The Simpsons*, a reflection of modern views regarding gender roles, chooses to portray this woman as «crazy»—crazy for being unattached to a man and attempting to enter into male-dominated fields of work. And while the series' focus on gender expectations will be discussed more in-depth in relation to Patty and Selma, the show often aligns single, elderly women with witchcraft in the same manner described by Wiesner.

2. «Easy bake coven» from «Treehouse of horror VIII»

This segment of the eighth Halloween episode serves to explain the beginnings of Halloween traditions. While the episode's faithfulness to the origins of the holiday is slim at best, it does prove very faithful to the context of the witch trials of the 1600's, especially in the American colonies. The vignette parodies the Salem witch trials; however, the motivations for the accusations and the construction of the witches themselves overlap with their Early Modern English counterparts. «Easy Bake Coven» (1997) takes place in the town of «Spynge-Field» in 1649 A.D. It begins with three women tied to stakes, surrounded by townspeople holding torches. Those being condemned as witches, referred to as «hags», represent the various types of women accused in the Early Modern period. Luann Van Houten, Milhouse's mother, is a character who in the series has recently left her husband. Mrs. Hoover, Lisa's second grade teacher, is viewed as a spinster, although being far from elderly.

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5 | The age of «The Crazy Cat Lady» is in dispute, though. While official sources put out by *The Simpsons*' creators place her age as 78, «Springfield Up» indicates that she went to high school with Homer Simpson. The notion of her craziness is also controversial, as the «medicine» she takes is revealed to be Reese's Pieces in «Homer and Ned's Hail Mary Pass» (2005).

Agnes Skinner, the town principal's mother, is portrayed as overtly sexual and over-sexed, even dressing in Jennifer Lopez's famous Grammy Awards dress in «Gump Roast» (2002). Again, while the three women here are dressed in American Colonial attire, their conventional characteristics speak to how the image of the witch is constructed, both in the Early Modern and modern popular culture⁶. While Hoover's spinsterhood has already been explained as a threat, Van Houten's and Skinner's association with insatiable sexuality is equally problematic. As Wiesner explains, sexual intercourse was viewed as a means to produce children, not as a source of pleasure (2000: 273). As Van Houten has left her husband in order to pursue sexual pleasure outside of marriage, and Skinner would be an example of a sex drive that has increased due to her age (a commonly-held belief according to Wiesner), then it becomes clear that these particular female characters are chosen to portray witches to highlight the witch's association with female sexuality.

While most of the townsfolk are eager for the burning of the witches to begin, two female characters question the events. When Lisa challenges the proceedings, she is accused of «witch talk» and immediately retreats. However, her mother Marge speaks out against the town's need to conduct these trials, and is immediately accused of being a witch. Although the first accusation comes from Moe, the most convincing evidence comes from a woman in the crowded town hall, yelling, «How come your laundry is much whiter than mine?» It is notable here that this voice is female, as the myth of the witch trials, or what Mary Daly called «The Burning Times», is that of the male persecutor and the female victim. Yet, *The Simpsons* presents women as having a more active role in the accusations, mirroring more closely the argument put forth by Diane Purkiss in *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*. As she states, «The theory that witch-hunting equals misogyny is embarrassed by the predominance of women witnesses against the accused» (1996: 92).

«Easy Bake Coven» does not portray a conventional witch trial—one of which will be discussed in «Rednecks and Broomsticks» (2009). Instead, as Rosen notes, later into the era of witch-hunting, townspeople would take the law into their own hands, believing the law to be «skeptical» (1991: 29). While the most common test would be the water-ordeal, this episode takes the test to an even further extreme. In order to give her «due process», they hand Marge a broom and push her off a high cliff. If she flies, she will be confirmed as a «bride of Satan»; if she falls, she «dies a Christian death». While the episode demonstrates the absurdity of this test, it also alludes to witch-hunting's link with Christianity. This is even more provocative as Ned earlier indicated that seventy-five witches had already been processed in order to «show God whose side we're on». While the

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6 | While it is important to refrain from conflating witch trials and the image of the witch from two different eras and geographical locations, the focus here will be on elements that overlap between American Colonialism and Early Modern.

religious issues regarding what constituted «Christianity»—whether the true religion was Protestant or Catholic, and how that controversy influenced witch-hunting—is an important one, it is ultimately too large to tackle in a project of this scale. However, the idea of witch-hunting as a Christian cause, alongside the witch’s link with the devil, is intrinsically tied to the construction of the witch’s image. These references allow viewers to understand the witch as not only demonic but as engaging in sexual intercourse with the devil, harking back to the Early Modern notion that «the witch-cult entailed sexual relations with the Devil himself» (Rosen, 1991: 17).

At first it appears that Marge has fallen to her death, but then she flies out of the canyon, her skin having turned green and her hair having turned black to simulate the witch’s hat. To complete this image of her as a witch, she also is seen with familiars, although hers are the bats that inhabit her hair. She admits that she has been practicing witchcraft, naming various examples of *maleficium* such as killing livestock, souring sheep’s milk, and making shirts «itchy». Two of these examples can be directly seen in pamphlets documenting the witch trials of the Early Modern period. For example, in *Witches at Chelmsford* from July of 1566, Mother Waterhouse confesses to having cows drowned and spoiling butter (Rosen, 1991: 76). Yet, even the «itchy» shirts demonstrate that the type of *maleficium* employed by Marge is of the domestic sphere, highlighting Purkiss’s argument that accusations of witchcraft may have more to do with « [negotiating] the fears and anxieties of housekeeping and motherhood» (1996: 93).

Marge joins her sisters Selma and Patty in the forest, and it is clear that black magic runs in the family. As Marge nears the two others in the midst of creating a potion in a boiling cauldron, the sisters engage in a heated debate about how much «eye of newt» should be used. This reference to Macbeth permanently links the three Bouvier sisters with the Weird Sisters, or witches, of Shakespeare⁷. While *Macbeth* and *The Simpsons* will be further explored below, the placement of Selma and Patty as witches is vital to this discussion. Marge’s sisters have been linked with the image of the witch in three of the four episodes discussed here, and again it is the series’ portrayal of them throughout its run that complicates the idea of the witch.

Selma and Patty are Marge’s twin sisters; being almost impossible to distinguish from each other, it is Selma who has her hair parted in the middle. With their hyper-masculine voices, refusal to shave their legs, and manly features, the sisters on physicality alone fit the stereotype of the witch as outside gender expectations. They are also perceived as a neighborly nuisance, especially by Homer. However, Patty and Selma are economically and socially independent—although maybe not from each other, and it is that very independence that enhances

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7 | «Eye of net, and toe of frog,/ Wool of bat, and tongue of dog./ [...] For a charm of powerful trouble,/ Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble» (4.1.14-15,18-19).

the construction of the witch in *The Simpsons*. Patty for example comes out as a lesbian in «There's Something about Marrying» (2005). Although clues about her sexual orientation had been dropped since the series' inception (as they have been for Mr. Smithers), she is the only recurring openly gay character on the show. She even plans to marry a woman she has fallen in love with, but rejects «her» when she learns that he is only pretending to be female to play in the PGA. While this episode comments extensively and with complexity on both same-sex marriage and homosexuality, it is important for this discussion that Patty has chosen to live a life without a man. She is a logical representation of the witch in the series, for she is truly, as Wiesner states, a woman «unattached to a man» (2000: 268).

Selma, on the other hand, has been divorced twice. While living without a man also links her to the image of the witch, it is her desire for motherhood that complicates the image. In «Selma's Choice» (1993), Selma discusses her lack of children as an «emptiness» in her life. Matthew Henry, in his «Don't Ask Me, I'm Just a Girl», views this episode, which follows Selma's decision to not be artificially inseminated, as one that challenges «nuclear family 'norms'», and champions a «woman's right to choose» (2007: 282). However, Selma's lack of a child to nurture, accompanied by her association with the witch, supports Willis's argument of «malevolent nurture». Willis points out that the accused witch is usually postmenopausal, and therefore unable to have a human child of her own. This anxiety, existing within her own body, causes her to «misdirect» her need to nurture towards the devilish imps, or familiars, that she feeds (1995: 33). In contrast, the victims of a witch's *maleficium* are often children, thereby allowing for a distortion of motherhood to be seen in the witch. As Willis explains, «She is a nurturing mother to her brood of demonic imps but a malevolent antimother to her neighbors and their children» (1995: 34).

As the remainder of this episode explains not only the origins of trick or treating, but also the association of child-eating with the witch, it can be seen that *The Simpsons* offers a complex notion of the witch as «mother». For, after viewing in the cauldron a discussion between Ned Flanders and his wife Maude, the three sisters devise a plan to eat the children of the town, since that is what the couple most feared. Although they later decide that scaring neighbors into giving them treats is not only more fun but tastier than eating human children, it is revealed that the Flanders home was not their first stop—and that many children in the town had already perished at the hands of the witches. While theories regarding the gender implications of witch-hunting have sometimes revolved around the number of deaths of children during this time period, and the finding of scapegoats in midwives, famously posited by Mary Daly and discounted by Diane Purkiss, the episode is referencing the image of the «night-flying

cannibalistic female witch» (Sharpe, 1996: 15). And, by repeatedly placing Selma in the role of the witch, the series must also thereby be complicating this debate with the idea of the «anti-mother».

3. «Rednecks and Broomsticks»

The most recent *The Simpsons* episode to deal with witchcraft, «Rednecks and Broomsticks» (2009), presents a complex figure of the witch. It debunks many of the myths and stereotypes often associated with witches (most of which the series has reinforced in previous episodes), establishes witchcraft's association with nature, and centers on the phenomenon of women who embrace the identity of the witch. As this is a full-length episode, as opposed to the vignettes seen in the Halloween episodes, there is a subplot, which at times seems tangential to the witchcraft theme, but in typical *The Simpsons* fashion, neatly converges with the main plot in the end.

After getting into a car accident and being rescued from a frozen lake, the Simpsons clan spends time with the town «rednecks». While Homer becomes involved in a moonshine enterprise, Lisa plays hide and seek with two of the Spuckler children. Unfortunately, the two children cannot count to one hundred, and Lisa is left hiding in the forest well into the night. She happens upon three cloaked young women conducting a chant over a boiling cauldron, and, while at first frightened, eventually becomes intrigued by their Wiccan beliefs⁸. Once their cloaks are removed, the women are revealed to be average-looking teenagers, although with lots of black eyeliner and pink-dyed hair. When Lisa expresses relief that they are not «witches», one responds that «technically» she is one, but they do not fly around on broomsticks «and things like that». This episode, therefore, becomes the first in which the physical image of the witch is challenged. Lisa learns of the esbat ritual, the influence of Lilith, and the communion of nature emphasized in Wicca, some of which she learns from «Wiccapedia». While some of these elements define the differences between witchcraft and Wicca, the episode highlights the overlap, mirroring the theory that witch-hunting may have originated in the attempt to eliminate pagan practices.

While previous episodes often reinforced the stereotype of the witch, «Rednecks and Broomsticks» problematizes it. For example, when Bart sees Lisa viewing a website with a pentagram on it, he is excited to learn that she is coming «over to the dark side». However, he then proclaims that she is too young to be a witch—that certain steps must be followed: college anorexia, failed marriages, career disappointments, a failed pottery shop, and then, once old and alone, a commitment to witchcraft. Bart is integrating two disparate

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8 | There is an anachronism here in that Lisa claims that she knows little of Wicca and confuses it with witchcraft. Yet, this episode appears after her declaration of dressing as a Wiccan instead of a witch in «Treehouse of Horror XIX».

figures here: the Early Modern witch being elderly and alone and the modern Wiccan, as a younger woman often associated with New Age stereotypes. And, yet, even in the midst of questioning this construction, Lisa—often portrayed as the enlightened one—gleefully plays with this traditional configuration. She dons a cape, uses a ruler as a wand, and proclaims Snowball II to be her familiar (much to his horror). To further highlight the ambivalent nature of these conventions, as Ned sees her frolicking around in her room in her «costume», he declares that he always knew that Buddhism was the gateway to witchcraft⁹. Hence, by this point of the episode, *The Simpsons* has challenged many of the conventions surrounding the construction of the witch—a construction which it has reinforced over the last two decades. The episode proposes that she may not be elderly, ugly, or demonic. And, yet, we as a society also cannot seem to move away from these notions.

For it is in the very next scene in which fear and mob mentality yet again overrule reason. As Lisa is in the midst of being accepted into the coven, in a scene heavily reminiscent of the initiation scene in *The Craft* (1996), the three young witches are arrested. In front of the courthouse, the local television news reporter asks, «Double, double, toil and trouble?» and approaches Patty and Selma. Again, because of the ways in which they resemble the stereotype of the witch, the reporter assumes they are the ones on trial (or at least the victims of some hideous spell). However, it is the three younger girls who proclaim themselves to be witches, examples of «women actively [seeking] a social identity as magic-users» (Purkiss, 1996: 145). Just as Purkiss explains, they are engaging in Wicca as a form of «female agency» (1996: 145). Hence, before the commencement of the trial, the three girls cast a spell to make their persecutors blind, and immediately, characters are shown losing their sight, thereby convincing the town of the validity of the accusations. The evidence presented in the trial is unconvincing, though, with one of the girls declaring, «We're just kids!» and the judge dismisses the case.

However, the townspeople still want justice, and, becoming an angry, torch-carrying mob, again led by Moe, they decide to implement 17th century law—the trial by water. Rosen describes the «water ordeal» as «one in which a suspect was trussed up and thrown into a pond to sink, if innocent or swim if guilty» (1991: 19). Note that the contraption is designed to ensure that in both cases the accused woman is removed as a problem, either by being found guilty or through death. Luckily, Lisa solves the mystery just in time, proving that the townspeople had been temporarily blinded by the moonshine her father had dumped into the reservoir. Although Lisa still savors her time with the Wiccans, in that it was the first time she has ever felt «cool», her mother insists that the only witch in her daughter's life will be «*which* boy will marry her». It is this

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9 | After an exhaustive journey through world religions, Lisa converted to Buddhism in a 2001 episode. «She of Little Faith» (16 Dec. 2001).

juxtaposition that highlights the ambivalence of not only the witch image but the gender expectations for women in modern American culture. While Marge may merely be concerned that her daughter finds a boy to marry, and therefore conform to heteronormative gender roles, Lisa is attempting to assert agency apart from these expectations in conjunction with finding acceptance. As the episode closes to the sounds of Donovan's «Season of the Witch» (1966), with Lisa ice skating alone in pure happiness, it appears that, at least in this episode, feminine roles have not only been challenged but restructured.

4. «Lady Macbeth» in «Four great women and a manicure»

The Simpsons has a long tradition of referencing the plays, and particular lines, of Shakespeare. The character of Sideshow Bob recites Shakespearean lines in almost all of the episodes in which he appears, and episode titles include «Much Apu about Nothing» (1996) and «Rome-Old and Julie-Eh» (2007). However, *Macbeth* in particular has been referenced often in the series. This play especially informs the way in which *The Simpsons* constructs the image of the witch, as it is one of, if not the most, influential text determining modern popular culture's idea of witchcraft¹⁰. In addition to the episode entitled «Double, Double, Boy in Trouble» (2008), the Simpsons family learns of the *Macbeth* curse from Ian McCellan while visiting England in «The Regina Monologues» (2003). However, the series' parody of *Macbeth* in «Four Great Women and a Manicure» (2009) best speaks to this discussion of the witch and the gender implications of its construction.

Marge introduces the tale as «the story of a great woman held back by a not so great husband». The parody takes the form of metatheater, in that the themes and plot of *Macbeth* are mirrored in the characters' production of the play. Marge, as a Lady Macbeth type, is the washer woman for the theater troupe, and the audience is introduced to her with the great line «Out, out, damn spot» as she is washing a costume. Homer has been assigned a small role in the play, as one of the trees, and as an understudy to Sideshow Mel, who has been given the role of Macbeth. However, Marge has greater ambitions for both herself and her husband, and devises a plan to have Homer murder Mel. Yet, once Homer is given the part of Macbeth, theater reviewers still offer more praise for the other actors—first, importantly, being Dr. Hibbard as Banquo. Marge insists that he kill every other actor in turn, so that he—and by extension she—can garner praise and respect. Homer at one point wonders if it wouldn't just be easier to take acting lessons, but instead he gives in to her demands. Eventually, though,

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10 | A case can definitely be made for the overwhelming influence of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) as well. However, much of the film's construction of the Wicked Witch is informed by the Early Modern period. Therefore, much of what can be traced to the film actually originated in the Early Modern era, and *Macbeth* along with other Early Modern drama in particular. With the exception of the green skin, perhaps itself influenced by the novelty of color in the film, and the striped socks, the predominant current image of the witch is much more influenced by the times of Shakespeare.

her conscience gets to her, and the ghosts of all those whose murders she has caused come to haunt her, resulting in her death. In terms of an analysis of the witch, a curious moment occurs here. As the reader probably knows, the characters of the Simpsons clan all have yellow skin. When Marge sees these phantasms, they emit a blueish hue across the stage, representing their translucency. However, when the frame changes to show Marge on the stage, the blue rays change her normally yellow skin to green—the exact color the series has used to portray every witch in the series' history up to this point. Alone, both onstage and in life, Homer as Macbeth gives the famous «tomorrow and tomorrow» speech, with only his wife's ghost in the audience. Finally proud of him, she insists that he can now play the leads in all of Shakespeare's plays, but as she begins to list them all, Homer shoots himself; he would rather die than have to read more Shakespeare.

While the exploration of the parody of *Macbeth* would be interesting for analysis, it ultimately would not add insight to this particular discussion. However, the juxtaposition between Shakespeare's Lady *Macbeth* and Marge Simpson will illuminate not only the discussion of gender roles and expectations, but their influence on the construction of the witch. As mentioned earlier, the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* greatly influence the popular modern notion of the witch. It is they whose «beards forbid [Banquo] to interpret» whether they are female or male (1.3.46). It is they who hover over a bubbling cauldron, chanting and creating potions (4.1). It is they who discuss *maleficium* such as «killing swine» (1.3.2) in response to petty slights. Admittedly, there is much ambiguity concerning the witches. Marjorie Garber in her *Shakespeare after All* asks, «Are they male? Female? Real or imaginary? Benevolent or wicked?» (2004: 696). Thus, it has been implied that they are liminal figures. Yet, their ambiguity is at least clarified by the fact that they are physical embodiments of witches. In contrast, there is no more liminal figure in *Macbeth* than Lady Macbeth—and the same can be claimed of Marge Simpson in *The Simpsons*.

Many have linked the ambiguity of the witch figures to Lady Macbeth. Garber states, «I think we can say with justice that those unisex witches...are among other things, dream images, metaphors, for Lady Macbeth herself: physically a woman but, as she claims, mentally and spiritually a man» (2004: 713). However, the connection between the witches and Lady Macbeth is perhaps most convincingly made in Janet Adelman's «'Born of a Woman': Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*». While this essay posits the claim that the ultimate problem in *Macbeth* of masculine vulnerability is solved through the removal of the feminine, it is Adelman's assertion of Lady Macbeth as a witch that is most useful here. She notes that the physical ambiguity of the witches is mirrored psychologically in Lady Macbeth's desire to unsex

herself (1987: 97). She also connects Lady Macbeth's summoning of spirits to «take my milk for gall» (1.5.47) as analogous to the characteristic familiars feeding off the witch (1987: 98). Adelman also notes that while the Weird Sisters are presumed to influence Macbeth's actions, it is actually his wife who has this power both through her words and her threats of emasculation (1987: 100-101). Hence, according to Adelman, the witches are merely a metaphor to enhance the audience's perception of Lady Macbeth as the true witch.

Yet, equally important about the figure of Lady Macbeth—and this is almost impossible to separate out from her association with the witch—is her liminal status. She can clearly not be claimed as feminine, due to her lack (or disruption) of a maternal instinct, her overt ambition for both her husband and by extension herself, and lack of «milk of human kindness» (1.5.16). Yet, she can clearly not be claimed as a man. Instead, she exists in a liminal space in-between the two genders, partaking of both and yet being of neither. For, in the Early Modern construction of the female, lack of conformity to gender expectations can only render one «other»—which in every respect is how the construction of the witch has also been rendered.

However, Marge Simpson's identity as a liminal figure both mirrors and complicates this idea. Henry labels Marge as a «liminal lady», based on Lori Landay's feminist research (2007). He finds that Marge is a metaphor for the contradictory expectations of the female in modern American culture; she exemplifies the ambivalence regarding a woman's role in society. As a married mother of three, working in the domestic sphere, Marge adheres to traditional gender role expectations. Yet, as someone who came of age during the second wave of feminism, she also challenges those expectations¹¹. Henry cites her liberation in contemplating an affair, her ability to excel as a police officer, and her insistence that Homer help out more with household duties. However, he also notes that whenever Marge steps out of the traditional female role, although questions might be raised regarding that role, each episode ends with Marge returning to the domestic sphere. Hence, Henry sees her as «the embodiment of the cultural contradictions of contemporary femininity» (2007: 291). On the one hand, American women of the 21st-century are encouraged to enter into the public sphere and embody feminist ideals; on the other hand, feminism has become a dirty word and women are still expected to be in control of the household. The issue of how to balance these two opposing but co-existing ideas of the feminine molds many women in modern culture to be liminal figures themselves, with Marge Simpson embodying the ambivalent notions of just what it means to be «female» in contemporary society.

NOTES

11 | Henry is clear here in asserting that she came of age during the 1970's. Yet, the series is very fluid with its chronology. As the characters do not age, and the series has been on the air for two decades, inconsistencies have arisen regarding age. Did Homer and Marge attend the prom in 1974 as stated in «The Way We Was» (1991), but not get married until after the age of Nirvana and Melrose Place as seen in «That 90's Show» (2008).

Therefore, when the viewer witnesses Marge Simpson portraying the figure of Lady Macbeth, a plethora of conflicting but contemporaneous reactions occur. We can count both of these fictional ladies as liminal, but see that they are constrained by ideas of gender from different time periods. However, we can also understand that there is still something «evil» about a woman attempting to control her husband, especially for the sake of ambition. And, if Marge (as Lady Macbeth) is also portrayed as a witch, then the impact of gender on the modern construction of the witch is still as essential as it was in the Early Modern construction.

I would like to end by returning to Lisa's question posed at the beginning of this project: Why is it that when a woman is confident and powerful, they call her a witch? As seen in this discussion, there are many proposed answers to this question in regards to how the witch was constructed for the Early Modern period. These theories range from socio-economic status to anxieties concerning motherhood and from gender role expectations to notions of identity and agency. What an analysis of the witch in *The Simpsons* has shown is that those very issues still construct the figure of the witch in modern popular culture, because much of how the witch is defined is closely related to how we define «woman».

The Simpsons episodes

- «She of Little Faith» (16 Dec. 2001)
- «Four Great Women and a Manicure» (10 May 2009)
- «Rednecks and Broomsticks» (29 Nov. 2009)
- «Selma's Choice» (21 Jan. 1993)
- «Springfield Up» (18 Feb. 2007)
- «There's Something about Marrying» (20 Feb. 2005)
- «Treehouse of Horror VIII» (26 Oct. 1997)
- «Treehouse of Horror XVI» (5 Nov. 2005)
- «Treehouse of Horror XIX» (2 Nov. 2008)
- «The Way We Was» (31 Jan. 1991)
- «That 90's Show» (27 Jan. 2008)
- «Homer and Ned's Hail Mary Pass» (6 Feb. 2005)

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