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Vengeful Witches/Angry Whores: Representations of Revenge in Popular Culture

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to trace the recurring gendering of revenge in Western popular culture. The “myth of Medea” is used to analyse the trope of the vengeful woman, whose uncontrolled, destructive anger is constructed as a communal threat and tied to the notion of sexual promiscuity. The first part of the paper provides a historical background for the analysis of the trope, including a foray into the history of the anger-sexual promiscuity-tabooed magic triad through a discussion of anger in Aristotle and its later, early modern applications in the discourse on the female body inspired by Ovid. The second part of the article focuses on the contemporary retelling of “the myth of Medea” that puts it in a new light (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*).

KEY WORDS

witch, popular culture, female anger, revenge, femininity

INTRODUCTION

From Baba Yaga functioning in the folklore of Eastern Europe to the Arthurian Morgan Le Fay, Shakespearian witches that manipulate Macbeth’s fate, and the contemporary witches of Eastwick, transgressive women with supernatural power have commanded human imagination and allowed it to explore often forbidden and dark regions of sexual attraction and fatal frenzy. Seductive or

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repulsive, the witch never fails to perplex with her powers to heal and harm and as such functions in the realm of Western popular culture as an iconic image recurring with audacious regularity. One of the oldest witch characters, Medea, infiltrated drama, fiction and film, creating a rich cultural reservoir of witchcraft-related attributes from which other, perhaps less conspicuous representations have drawn. The resonance of the “myth of Medea,”¹ as a powerful sorceress, faithful lover, wise woman, but also a murderous mother and vigilante is strengthened by the ontological ambiguity of the witch and her liminal positioning as the monstrosized Other, whose objectionable morality is expressed in transgressive desires and actions. Euripides already made it very clear in *Medea* that the emotion emblematic for witches is anger, and the action vehement revenge. It is vengeance that recurs as a frequent motif in witch trials and also finds its vibrant echoes in the contemporary representations of witches on stage, in fiction and in film.

This paper investigates the intimate ties between the uncontrollable female body, witchcraft and vengeance drawn in Western popular culture under the influence of both the classical tradition linking women and excessive emotionality on the one hand, and prohibitive Christian thought on female sexuality on the other. The hexing or cursing paradigmatic for witches is often portrayed not only as a display of power threatening the patriarchal order, but also, and at times predominantly, as an act of vengeance. The early modern witch trials that were rhetorically constructed around the central figure of the transgressive woman² were directly linked with the development of the image of a vengeful witch/angry whore that found its discrete representations in popular culture for generations to come, fuelled by and fuelling in their own turn the forceful prohibition of witchcraft, female anger and vengeance. The gendered notions of revenge and anger have been only recently reinvestigated from the vantage point of feminist criticism, while the emblematic figure of the vengeful witch/angry whore has been reclaimed by feminist-oriented writers and TV producers as a way of speaking about social and cultural anxieties surrounding the changing conceptions of femininity. It seems that the cultural politics of the last two decades allowed for a more relaxed, less threatening repositioning

¹ Lilian Corti uses the term, but in a context limited to her discussion of infanticide, see: L. Corti, *The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children*, Westport, Ct 1998. From my point of view the myth of Medea stands in a metonymic relationship to the witch-myth as such, creating a handy framework of attributes to draw from in the construction of the figure of the witch in popular culture.

² It is important to note that the very conception of femininity leads to the situation in which not every witch is a woman, but every woman may turn out to be a witch.

of the myth of Medea, bolstering the position of radical alterity as a viable option for self-empowerment. Even though this essay does not pretend to be a thorough account of the history of witchcraft, the myth of Medea, or its contemporary retellings, it hopefully offers some insight into the significant shift in the representations of vengeful witches in Western culture.

THE MYTH OF MEDEA IN THE EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

One of the major events that held the attention of the general populace during the reign of James I were the 1612 Lancaster witch trials which were the first large-scale trials of this type in northern England, with approximately twenty accused, among whom two elderly women called Old Demdike and Old Chattox came to the fore as those who commanded the devil to do their bidding. The trials, whose central figures were referred to as Pendle Witches or Lancashire Witches, led to the hanging of ten men and women for alleged murder by witchcraft, while one woman, found guilty of witchcraft but not murder, was sentenced to one year in prison. The trials were described in minute detail in what would become the most famous account of witchcraft on the British Isles.³ Thomas Potts's quarto *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches* (1612) provides the following confession of the accused, Elizabeth Sowtherns "alias Demdike, taken at the Fence in the Forrest of *Pendle* in the Countie of *Lancaster*":

[...] a little before Christmas last, this Examinates Daughter having been to helpe *Richard Baldwyns* Folkes at the Mill: This Examinates Daughter did bid her this Examinee goe to the said *Baldwyns* house, and aske him something for her helping of his Folkes at the Mill, (as aforesaid:) and in this Examinates going to the said *Baldwyns* house, and neere to the said house, she mette with the said *Richard Baldwyn*; Which *Baldwyn* sayd to this Examinee, and the said *Alizon Devise* (who at that time ledde this Examinee, being blinde) get out of my ground Whores and Witches, I will burne the one of you, and hang the other. To whom this Examinee answered: I care not for thee, hang thy selfe: Presently whereupon, at this Examinates going over the next

³ For a detailed account of the Lancaster trials, see, e.g. E. Peel, P. Southern, *The Trials of the Lancashire Witches: A Study of the 17th-century Witchcraft*, Newton Abbot 1969. For a discussion of witchcraft at the time, see, e.g. H. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch Craze in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, New York 1967; A. Harris, *Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth Century English Drama*, Manchester 1980; *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials*, eds. B. Ankarloo, S. Clark, Philadelphia 2003.

hedge, the said Spirit or Divell called *Tibb*, appeared unto this Examinat, and sayd, *Reuenge thee of him*. To whom, this Examine sayd againe to the said Spirit. *Reuenge thee eyther of him, or his*. And so the said Spirit vanished out of her sight, and she neuer saw him since.⁴

In this confession of Old Demdike we read that Demdike's daughter who had worked at a local mill was underpaid, and therefore her mother went to the mill to collect the payment. Her audacity led to the incident in which both women were verbally abused. At this point Old Demdike confessed to having dealings with the devil that she would call Tibb. As we learn later on, Tibb's machinations would supposedly lead to the death of Baldwin's child as revenge for cheating and cursing the witches. What is of particular interest in this passage is the fact that the women, who are bold enough to demand their due, are immediately called "witches and whores" by the miller who threatens them with denunciation and death, not an empty threat in the times when the social unrest and tension in villages caused frequent and ungrounded witchcraft accusations, to the point where a sceptical country gentleman Reginald Scot already wrote a treatise on *Discoverie of Witchcraft* around 1584.⁵ The full title of this first demonological treatise in the history of English thought on the matter was *The discoverie of witchcraft, Wherein the lewde dealing of witches and witchmongers in notablie detected*, where the titular "witchmonger" is, as Cora Fox does not fail to observe, a neologism, used to address those who are disreputably involved in the business of creating/capturing witches: the adjective *lewde* describes both the besotted women who believe they possess real power, and those who desire to expose them as witches, connoting inordinate lust that was one of the characteristic attributes of women in the early modern times.⁶ The mother and daughter are designated as "witches and whores" exactly because they are bold enough to be motivated by desire and anger: they come asking for remuneration and when they are not given what they want, they seek, or are offered revenge. Independently from the concrete historical circumstances of the society obsessed with disorder and the psychosocial reality of women forced into confession of witchcraft,⁷ the

⁴ T. Potts, *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches*, [in:] *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing*, ed. M. Gibson, London–New York, p. 184.

⁵ R. Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft, Wherein the Lewde Dealing of Witches and Witchmongers in Notablie Detected*, London 1584.

⁶ C. Fox, *Ovid and the Politics of Emotion in Elizabethan England*, Basingstoke 2009, pp. 125–126.

⁷ More on the link between witchcraft, power and law, see: C. Holmes, *Women: Witnesses and Witches*, "Past and Present" 1993, Vol. 140, pp. 45–78; J. Sharpe, *Women, Witchcraft and the Legal Process*, [in:] *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England*,

examination creates a rhetorical image of the witch as a desiring subject that, once refused the object of her craving, plans vengeance that is linked with the underworld through the image of the devilish imp who comes to the witch's aid and executes a distorted, inordinate version of justice.⁸

This image of a lustful witch that once offended seeks excessive payback is to a large extent influenced by Ovidianism as a specific worldview creating a gendered framework of reference for the supernatural metamorphoses allegedly performed by the witches. As Cora Fox argues in her seminal work on Ovid's influence on the early modern culture, Ovid's literary representations, drawn in particular from his *Metamorphoses* were involved in a complex process of cultural creation of witchcraft. As she claims "Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was [...] instrumental in perpetuating the literary type of the witch – mainly through the figure of Medea – and in that sense this translated classical text directly influenced the constructions of English witches and their fates at the hands of religious and secular authorities."⁹

Ovid was only one of the classical authors, whose works touched upon the tragic fate of Medea, a granddaughter of Helios, a priestess of Hecate and a mighty sorceress who abandoned her land and her people for her love of Jason the Argonaut, who would then unjustly divorce her in order to strike a more politically profitable alliance through marriage with an Athenian princess, unleashing in the process the grieving fury of his godlike ex-wife and pushing her to kill either his bride and/or, depending on the variant, their two sons. However, it is Ovid's treatment of the female characters, construed along the lines of excessive emotionality and desire for vengeance, that turned out to be one of the main forces shaping the rhetorical representation of witchcraft as a way of getting even with men. As Fox claims, "what is crucially at stake in most representations of witchcraft in England is anxiety about female anger or jealousy – the kinds of emotions that are excessive enough to incite revenge."¹⁰ The moral character of anger was tied directly to what was perceived at the time as sexual difference. Renaissance culture would abound in disputes on the female nature, to a large extent influenced by the classical,

eds. J. Kermode, G. Walker, London 1994, pp. 106–124; and M. Gaskill, *Witchcraft and Power in Early Modern England: The Case of Margaret Moore*, [in:] *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England*, op. cit., pp. 125–145.

⁸ Cf. K. E. Maus, *Sorcery and Subjectivity in Early Modern Discourses of Witchcraft*, [in:] *Historicism, Psychoanalysis and Early Modern Culture*, eds. C. Mazzio, D. Trevor, New York 2000, pp. 325–348.

⁹ C. Fox, op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

Aristotelian notion of anger as “a desire accompanied by pain, for conspicuous retaliation because of a conspicuous slight that was directed, without justification, against oneself or those near to one”¹¹ that was justified only when directed against one’s equal. Women, whose social standing was decidedly lower than men’s, could not legitimately express their anger, as such a display of emotions would automatically become a transgression of the social norm. Additionally, as anger was an emotion considered to increase the body’s temperature, it also posed another threat, that of metamorphosis into a male, as Ambroise Paré attests in his treatise *On Monsters and Marvels*.¹² This is why the infirm and unstable female nature had to be controlled, as “[W]omen are commonly sooner driven into cholera than men [...] Whereby it is evident enough, that cholera proceedeth from the infirme and weake part of the soule, and not from the Generositie thereof.”¹³

Ovidian worldview went then hand in hand with the conceptions of femininity prevalent at the time, conceptualising women as less rational and more libidinous than men: for this reason single women, widows and the elderly were especially suspicious, as their bodily imbalance stemming from the lack of regular intercourse would ultimately push them to seek degenerate ways of satisfying their carnal appetites, and willingly accept demonic favours in this respect. As Marianne Hester observes, “women were considered sexually insatiable and prone therefore to sinful and deviant behaviour,”¹⁴ which in turn was supposed to be a visible mark of their inherent moral inferiority, propensity to anger and vengeful impulse interpreted to be either a part of their emotionally and mentally corrupt nature or springing from their general susceptibility to devilish influence. In any case, witchcraft and sexual promiscuity went hand in hand, to the extent that sexually uninhibited witches were accused of controlling male sexuality. The sourcebook for other witch pamphlets and the most influential compendium for witch-hunters was *The Malleus Malificarum* (the “hammer of witches”) composed in 1487 by the Dominican Heinrich Kramer, one of the “witchmongers”, against whom Scot wrote his sceptical treatise. *The Malleus Malificarum* constructs an image of witches

¹¹ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. G. A. Kennedy, New York–Oxford 1991, II, 2, 1378a.

¹² A. Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, trans. J. L. Pallister, Chicago–London 1983, pp. 31–33.

¹³ P. de La Primaudaye, *The French Academie (1586)*, Hildesheim–New York 1972, pp. 312–313.

¹⁴ M. Hester, *Patriarchal Reconstruction and Witch-Hunting*, [in:] *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, eds. J. Barry et al., Cambridge 1998, p. 294.

who were not only insatiable whores, but who could also emasculate men and collect their sexual organs in a display of perverse power:

And what, then, is to be thought of those witches who [...] sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report? [...] For a certain man tells that, when he had lost his member, he approached a certain witch to ask her to restore his health. She told the afflicted man to climb a certain tree, and that he might take whichever member he liked out of a nest in which there were several members. And when he tried to take a big one, the witch said, "you must not take that one," adding, "because it belonged to a parish priest."¹⁵

The link between frightening female sexuality, vengefulness and the dark arts was only strengthened by the Jacobean theatre, at the time one of the most popular pastimes of both the lower and upper classes. Owing to the avid interest in demonology displayed not only by the learned men of the time, but also by the king himself, London theatres started staging plays, where witches appeared as major characters integral to the construction of the plot, like in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (c. 1606), or where they, themselves, were eponymous characters, as in Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (1613–1615) or John Ford, Thomas Dekker and William Rowley's play *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621). In all these cases the characters closely resemble the figures of the revengers domineering the theatre at the time. Motivated by a strong sense of offence or spite, the witches of the early modern stage take revenge on other characters, plotting their downfall and wreaking havoc, to meet a sad end. The metaphorical association of witches and revenge was so strong that Francis Bacon would contend in his 1597 essay *Of Revenge* that "vindictive persons live the life of witches; who as they are mischeivous, so end they infortunate", conceptualising vindictive impulse in terms of witchcraft.¹⁶

The witchcraft craze subsided over the course of the seventeenth century,¹⁷ but the literary legacy of the early modern preoccupation with vindictive and promiscuous witches continued to exert its influence over the imagination of

¹⁵ H. Kramer, J. Springer, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. M. Summers, New York 2007, p. 121.

¹⁶ F. Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral*, ed. B. Vickers, Oxford–New York 1999, p. 11.

¹⁷ Although even during the time of witches' persecution numerous writers raised objections against the way women were presented and treated throughout the witch trials, witchcraft itself became punishable by death in 1641.

Western writers and, with the birth of the cinema, of film directors as well. For centuries, fertility rites, love magic, tabooed relationships in the form of adultery, incest, animal sex, sabbath orgies and sex with demons or the devil himself had become the focus of the witch-myth and provided ample ground for narratives professing a fascination with female sexuality in its most uncontrollable, phantasmic forms, leading to scopophilic representations of often racialized witches that were meant to channel the erotic fantasies of the sexually repressed Western culture.¹⁸ The theme of witchcraft used for vindictive purposes is a continuing tradition, whose paradigmatic cases may be found in short stories, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown", William Seabrook's "The Witch's Vengeance" (1930), novels such as *Darkfall* by Dean Koontz (1984) and *Furnace* by Muriel Gray (1997), and films, such as *The Seventh Victim* (1943), *Black Sunday* (1960), *Witchcraft* (1964), or *The Witches* (1966). All of these narratives make use of the negative representation of the witch who, like Medea, is presented as a transgressive woman, driven by emotions and motivated by the urge to destroy, and whose power is inexorably bound with her deviant, fatal sexuality.

RAGE DOMESTIC AND NATURAL: "WHITE WITCHES" AND VENGEANCE VINDICATED

Reginald Scot's scepticism as to the existence of witchcraft found its reflection in literature as well, in a sub-group of texts concerned with the literary defence of those condemned as witches. In such works as Wilhelm Meinhold *The Amber Witch* (English trans. 1844), Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953) or Elizabeth George's *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (1958), witchcraft is presented as a social threat, but from the point of view of the protagonists accused of being witches and suffering the dire consequences of stigmatisation and persecution. The sympathetic approach to witches does not end here, however, as popular culture has, indeed, in its store, an alternative version – the "good" witch.

¹⁸ History of witchcraft is yet to be analysed in terms of race and ethnicity as thoroughly as it has been in terms of economy and gender, but it seems to be more than a coincidence that racial difference is one of the possible markers of alterity in the representations of witches. In one form or another it figures in the stories of Medea, Shakespeare's Sycorax, Othello's mother and even the witches in Macbeth, acquiring more and more significance with the increase in the encounters with non-Europeans and the rise of colonialism.

This alternative tradition seems to go back to the same complex of stories constructed around Medea that are responsible for the construction of the early modern witch, but it goes beyond the revenge narrative known from Euripides, Ovid and Seneca¹⁹ and attributes to Medea power from sources other than the dark arts, fashioning her more into a sorceress or a priestess than an agent of the demonised supernatural. Ruth Morse describes the process of literary amalgamation of legends about Medea as a “process of imitation, a kind of literary parthenogenesis, a succession of *different* characters” largely dependent on “whether or not she is a witch [...and on the situation] when a witch might not be a witch: when she is already a supernatural figure, or when she is not a woman.”²⁰ This versatility is exactly the reason why Christine de Pisan could include Medea among the blessed women of the *Cité des Dames*. The idea of the benevolent sorceress is indeed based on what became known within the critical idiom of the early modern studies as the angel/whore dichotomy, whereby women are constructed along the angelic and demonic lines. Within the twentieth century retellings of the “myth of Medea” this dichotomy occurs most blatantly in the figures of Glinda the Good Witch and the Wicked Witch of the West in Frank Baum’s Oz books (1900–1920) and the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Over the years the image of an angelic, desexualised women with supernatural powers became a constant presence in the twentieth-century popular culture, with such films as *I Married a Witch* (1942), *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958) and TV shows like *Bewitched* (1964–1972), where witchcraft becomes domesticated in the comedic mode, and the witch falls in love, relinquishing her powers once she enters the state of marital bliss.

The “cunning women”, “conjurers” or “pellars” of early modern England, who started to be called “white witches” only with the onset of the nineteenth-century folklorism²¹ have found their way into literature as worshippers of the mother goddess (as in Elizabeth Hand’s *Waking the Moon*, 1995) or medical practitioners or healers (e.g. in Richard Matheson’s “From Shadowed Places”, 1960). The term itself became rehabilitated and popularised by Margaret Murray,²² which led to the development of a religious system, variously known as neo-paganism or Wicca, created among others by Gerald

¹⁹ For a comprehensive survey of classical and modern Medeas, see: D. Mimoso-Ruiz, *Médée antique et moderne: aspects rituels et socio-politiques d’un mythe*, Paris 1982; Morse’s own study concentrates on the discussion of Medea in the medieval tradition.

²⁰ R. Morse, *The Medieval Medea*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 18–19.

²¹ See, C. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. J. Tedeschi, A. Tedeschi, Baltimore 1983.

²² M. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, Oxford 1921.

Gardner. Wicca added to the strength of the more benevolent representation of the witch in popular culture, with Wiccan fiction such as Rosemary Edghill's novel *Speak Daggers to Her* (1994). Wiccan influences are also visible in television shows such as *Charmed* (1998–2006), where the opening episode is titled “Something Wicca This Way Comes”, or in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), where the cult itself is depicted in two different ways: as a ridiculed college fab, and as a serious religious commitment to keeping the world in balance.²³ It is the latter show that more than any other suggests that the use of magic as a form of female power is not inherently (im)moral, but capitalises on the moral ambiguity of that power in a variety of ways.

The classic *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, directed by Joss Whedon, engages with the socially constructed norm on a number of different levels, addressing in a critical way the monstrosity of women who get out of control. The performance of gender norm in this show resignifies the cultural norms and provides a transgressive reading of many of the literary tropes fashioning women into monsters. Unsurprisingly, witchcraft figures prominently in the series both as a recurring theme and as a metaphor for a plethora of issues: self-empowerment, lesbianism, liberation from convention, but also as a threatening power and an intoxicating substance that can be abused. Sunnydale magic comes in all possible shades of black and white, and the stereotypical images of witches from classical literature, folklore, history of witch trials and contemporary occult subcultures are all exploited, often with an ironic exaggeration or a playful twist. However, the importance of magic in its many different forms takes on the most significant shape in the figure of one of the three main characters, Willow Rosenberg, who throughout the course of seven seasons of *Buffy* undergoes a rather telling metamorphosis straddling on the thin line between the use and abuse of her power. Willow makes a transition from a shy computer geek who inadvertently wakes up a demon imprisoned in a volume of ancient lore, through a budding witch who awakens to magic/sexuality, then an emotionally distraught addict hooked on the power of spells, an abstinent who reaches for the power to become a vengeful agent of the apocalypse, to finally become a covenant witch that draws her strength to combat the forces of darkness from her unity with nature. It is this character that more than any other recreates the myth of

²³ For a further discussion of magic in Whedon's series, see. e.g. T. Krzywinska, *Hubble-Bubble, Herbs and Grimoires: Magic, Manichaeism, and Witchcraft in Buffy*, [in:] *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, eds. R. V. Wilcox., D. Lavery, Lanham 2002, pp. 178–194.

Medea in all its complicatedness and deconstructs the dichotomy between domesticated “white” witches and devious agents of evil.

The show, whose protagonist is described by Bruce McClelland as “belonging to... [the] essentially American mythological modality of superhero”²⁴ constantly interrogates the ambiguities of moral systems that render justice impersonal and impassionate, coding it along the stereotypically masculine standards of rational thinking and an unemotional approach to reality. Under circumstances in which the society’s undesirables are largely non-human, supernatural and at times decidedly monstrous, law in its traditional understanding becomes irrelevant. Already in the pilot episode for the series, *Welcome to the Hellmouth*, Willow asks the elderly librarian Giles, who turns out to be the so-called Watcher sent to teach (and control) the Vampire Slayer, Buffy, whether they should report to the police the demon activity in Sunnydale, to which Giles replies with a truly British air: “They wouldn’t believe us, of course.”²⁵ The main characters’ efforts to protect the world remain for the most part clandestine, which complicates the exercise of justice understood as a socially approved way of punishing those that trespass against the rules accepted by society. Retribution and punishment are dealt out singly-handedly by the girlish, but still transgressive Buffy, who is forced to decide the matters of demon/human/cyborg life and death on her own. Buffy’s position at the heart of the rule of law is initially enabled by the fact that she is the Chosen One (as repeatedly noted in the opening credits of the show), trained and approved of by the predominantly male Council of Watchers who stand vigil over the threats to the metaphysical order of the world. The Council, however, is first fired by Buffy and then destroyed. The question of female anger and propensity for revenge is posed in a new light, once justice itself becomes feminized in the world of the TV series and vengeance reveals its truly human face.²⁶

²⁴ B. McClelland, *By Whose Authority? The Magical Tradition, Violence and the Legitimation of the Vampire Slayer*, “Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies” 2001, No 1, [online] www.slayageonline.com/Volumes/Slayage_Volume_1.pdf 25+ [accessed: 20 Jan 2015].

²⁵ All the quotes come from transcripts on <http://www.buffyworld.com/> [accessed: Jan 2015].

²⁶ Revenge is one of the leitmotifs of *Buffy*, propelling the actions of the majority of characters, both the human and non-human protagonists as well as the human and monstrous antagonists. The blurring of the lines between justice and revenge is critically investigated into by the show and becomes one of the central issues the characters have to embrace while growing up. Revenge becomes virtually human, as one of the two vengeance demons

The complex relationship between justice and revenge becomes central to the character of Willow at the end of season six, when Willow, already a powerful witch, grieves the incidental murder of her love, Tara, by a former schoolmate, Warren, who in his obsessive quest to destroy Buffy hurts the Slayer and shoots Tara. Not able to come to terms with this “natural passing”, Willow tries to raise Tara from dead, and then visits the magic shop to virtually consume magic from grimoires, surrendering to their power and detaching herself from her grief by allowing herself to feel only vengeful anger (as her friend notes: she is “all wrathy”). She visits the hospital, in which Buffy seems to be dying and heals her, taking away the bullet that hit the Slayer. When she is on her way to capture Warren, Buffy engages into an exchange with her friend, Xander, and her sister, Dawn, which provides the moral compass for the whole storyline and suggests that even though Buffy knows what is right, it is hard not to side with Willow and treat her revenge quest as just, or at least, as justified:

BUFFY: (sighing) We need to find Willow.

XANDER: Yeah, she’s off the wagon big-time. Warren’s a dead man if she finds him.

DAWN: (bitterly) Good.

BUFFY: Dawn, don’t say that.

DAWN: Why not? (the others looking at her) I’d do it myself if I could.

BUFFY: Because you don’t really feel that way.

DAWN: Yes I do. And you should too. He killed Tara, and he nearly killed you. He needs to pay.

XANDER: Out of the mouths of babes.

BUFFY: Xander.

XANDER: I’m just saying he’s ... he’s just as bad as any vampire you’ve sent to dustville.

BUFFY: Being a Slayer doesn’t give me a license to kill. Warren’s human.

DAWN: (scoffs) So?

BUFFY: So the human world has its own rules for dealing with people like him.

XANDER: Yeah, we all know how well those rules work.

BUFFY: Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don’t. We can’t control the universe. If we were supposed to ... then the magic wouldn’t change Willow the way it does. And...

that become a regular presence in the “Buffyverse”, turns human *again*, almost marries one of the main characters, turns demon *again*, then decides vengeance is too bloody a sport for her after all, and finally dies fighting against the demon side in the epic battle at the end of the last TV season.

we'd be able to bring Tara back. [...] There are limits to what we can do. There should be. Willow doesn't want to believe that. And now she's messing with forces that want to hurt her. All of us.

XANDER: I just... I've had blood on my hands all day. (looks Buffy in the eye) Blood from people I love.

BUFFY: I know. And now it has to stop. Warren's going to get what he deserves. I promise. But I will *not* let Willow destroy herself. (*Villains*)

In her gruesome chase for Warren, who tries to defend himself by magic and technology, Willow realises that Tara was not Warren's first victim, as he had killed his girlfriend for walking out on him. By making Katrina's ghost appear, Willow reveals Warren's misogyny, when he gives as the reason for the murder: "Because you deserved it, bitch!" (*Villains*) Having finally hunted him down, Willow touches upon the familiar problem of control over women that seems to be Warren's real *modus operandi*, stating: "You never felt you had the power with her. Not until you killed her. [...] You get off on it. [...] That's why you had a mad-on for the Slayer. She was your big O, wasn't she, Warren?" (*Villains*) She starts torturing Warren by burying the bullet really slowly into his chest, talking to him about the agony of pain before dying, and it becomes clear that she is at once describing the pain that Warren will feel, Tara's death and her own prolonged agony of grief. When Buffy, Xander and the vengeance demon, Anya, arrive onto the spot, Willow skins Warren with a casual gesture of her hand and then disappears in fire and smoke to orchestrate the death of Warren's sidekicks she also deems responsible for Tara's death. Once she finds out that they are protected by her own friends, she turns against all of them, including Buffy and her mentor, Giles, who returns channelling a British coven's magic to combat the witch. When Willow wins the fight and drains Giles of magic, she becomes reconnected to everything that lives, feels the pain again, and therefore decides to end the misery of all living creatures with a full-scale apocalypse.

As her friends know, and Willow herself makes clear, the witch has become magic, letting her addition absorb her:

DAWN: You're back on the magicks.

WILLOW: No, honey. I am the magicks. [...]

BUFFY: Willow, I know what you want to do, but you have to listen to me. The forces inside you are incredibly powerful. They're strong... but you're stronger. [...] You have to remember you're still Willow. [...] you lose everything. Your friends, your self... Willow, if you let this control you then the world goes away. And all of us with it. (*Villains*)

It seems that at the point when Willow succumbs to her emotion and desire to annihilate the world, the traditional villainous representation of a vengeful witch comes to the fore. As Giles explains to Buffy, however, “the rise of a dangerous magical force [...] in Sunnydale” is the rise of a force that is “fuelled by grief” (*Grave*). It is an important realisation that changes the weight of Willow’s act of revenge and which in the season’s finale allows Xander, Willow’s best friend, to confront her. The confrontation takes place when Willow is already casting a spell that will “let the cleansing fires from the depths burn away the suffering souls and bring sweet death”, but it does not involve an epic battle, which Xander, as the only one of the “Scooby gang” cannot possibly wage and win. Instead he asks Willow to kill him first as, after all, he has earned the honour by being her best friend throughout her life:

WILLOW: You can’t stop this.

XANDER: Yeah, I get that. It’s just, where else am I gonna go? You’ve been my best friend my whole life. World gonna end... where else would I want to be?

WILLOW: (scornfully) Is this the master plan? You’re going to stop me by telling me you love me? [...]

XANDER: [...] I know you’re in pain. I can’t imagine the pain you’re in. And I know you’re about to do something apocalyptically (glancing back at the statue) evil and stupid, and hey. (spreading out his arms) I still want to hang. You’re Willow.

WILLOW: (angry) Don’t call me that.

XANDER: First day of kindergarten. You cried because you broke the yellow crayon, and you were too afraid to tell anyone. You’ve come pretty far, ending the world, not a terrific notion. But the thing is? Yeah. I love you. I loved crayon-breaky Willow and I love... scary veiny Willow. So if I’m going out, it’s here. If you wanna kill the world? Well, then start with me. I’ve earned that. (*Grave*)

When he repeatedly and impossibly tells her, he loves her, making himself vulnerable and letting her unleash her fury on him, Willow’s magic fails her, and she collapses onto the ground, finally allowing herself to feel her grief in all its incapacitating fullness. This episode demonstrates that witchcraft in itself is a tool not to be trifled with, but a tool nonetheless, and that magic is a power, whose sources may be manifold. It becomes apparent in the exchange between Giles and Anya that the ties between magic and vengeance are close, but there is nothing unnatural about them, just like there is nothing unnatural about emotionality itself:

GILES: The gift I was given by the coven was the true essence of magic. Willow’s magic came from a... place of rage and power.

ANYA: And vengeance. Don't forget vengeance.

GILES: Oh. How could I? In any case, the magic she took from me tapped into... the spark of humanity she had left. Helped her to feel again. Gave Xander the opportunity to... reach her. (*Grave*)

Even though it might be argued that Xander symbolically confines Willow or controls her rage, it seems that the opposite is true: by reminding her that she will be loved unconditionally, whoever she will choose to become, he creates a space for her to release her anger and grief in a way that will ultimately be checked only by her own love for him. As Richardson and Rabb insist, Xander's strategy and Willow's reaction are indeed inscribed into "a program which [...] is developing a love ethic rather than a moral philosophy based on reason."²⁷

The finale of season six marks the end of the fundamental rift between "crayon-breaky Willow" and "scary veiny Willow" sketched in the previous seasons, where Willow, still in her pubescent pre-witchcraft phase, meets her really dark, *doppelgänger* vampire-Gothic alter ego and does not want to admit that it could really be her: "I'm so evil and ... skanky! And I think I'm kinda gay" (*Doppelgängland*). The binary between the overtly sexualised "bad" Willow who is fully aware of her sexual orientation (one way or the other²⁸), her desires and drives, and the asexual "good" Willow is a construct which inhibits the character from growing, and which under the weight of her rage and grief finally crumbles, revealing in the process that emotionality and desire for vengeance are human to the core. Having embraced her dark self, Willow is able to mature, and turn into the witch, whose power scares even the primary evil preparing itself to invade the human world.

The recent retellings of witch narratives critically engage the witch-myth tradition in all its complexity, renegotiating the factors decisive for the construction of the image of the witch: female sexuality and emotionality. The traditional division lines between angels and whores have undergone a major process of deconstruction, in revisions of older narratives and in new, original stories, in order to create an image of a witch whose agenda may be just, or at least justified, and whose sexuality does not necessarily pose an immediate threat to masculinity. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* opened up a space for new

²⁷ J. M. Richardson, J. D. Rabb, *The Existential Joss Whedon*, Jefferson NC 2007, p. 93.

²⁸ Willow's vampire alter ego has an affair with Willow's best friend, Xander, on whom she had her secret crush as a teenager, while her witch self discovers witchcraft and lesbian love that are intricately interwoven, see Richardson and Rabb for a survey of scholarship on the matter, *ibidem*, pp. 92–93.

versions of the myth of Medea that do justice to her revenge. By repeatedly telling the story of witches that discover and learn to control their powers such texts of popular culture as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Witches of East End* (2013–2014) and recently also *Salem* (2014) express the cultural zeitgeist that allows for a new understanding of revenge and its gendering, and find in witchcraft a potent metaphor serving to critically investigate the culturally entrenched beliefs concerning female nature. In the process they all send a significant message: witches are back, and they do have the power.

Research for this article was financed by the Polish National Science Centre grant no DEC-2012/05/N/HS2/00331.

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But the pop cultural idea of witches hit its stride when Hollywood presented the Wicked Witch of the West in 1939's *The Wizard of Oz*. If pop culture holds a mirror up to the values we express as a larger culture, then what Hollywood seems to be saying is that only people of a certain class, appearance, age, and race get to exist and be good in that society. Yet that fundamentally misunderstands what witchcraft is about. But as witchcraft becomes more popular, we have to be wary of who gets to tell witches' stories: those who know firsthand about these centuries-old traditions, or people who are still afraid, and let their prejudices influence what they think it means to be magic. Related: How Disfigured Villains Like "Wonder Woman's" Dr. Poison Perpetuate Stigma.