

# Wielding Magic, Smashing Patriarchy

Feminist Witchcraft as Social Resistance

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*In high school, we called the tree under which we ate lunch “The Goddess Tree”.*

(K. Murray, personal communication, May 31, 2009)

## 1 Introduction

Before I sat down to write this paper I undertook a spell to bring academic success. I cast a sacred circle, invoked the four cardinal directions and their associated elements, called upon the god and goddess and asked them to bless my books, pen, laptop, and blank computer paper on which I would ultimately print this paper by chanting:

Air, whisper my books' secrets  
Fire, inspire my pen  
Water, let the words flow  
Earth, give my paper strength

This was an (attempted) act of magic. I enacted a ritual, which drew on a mythological understanding of the world, and I manipulated symbols with the aim of producing a real-world effect. In the west, belief in magic is now rare (Gill et al., 1998). However, it has not died out completely. Specifically, it lives on in modern neopagan religions (Pike, 2004). Neopagan is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of practices. This paper will focus on one group of practices within the broader neopagan movement, that of feminist witchcraft. Feminist witchcraft is not a unified set of beliefs and practices but a stream of thought that encompasses multiple traditions, which have in common the desire to (through magic) create a more just society (Klassen, 2008, p. 19), with particular emphasis on “struggling against patriarchal oppression” (Budapest, 2007, p. 1).

At first glance the idea that (unreal) magic can be a tool of resistance against (very real) patriarchal oppression is likely to be discounted as superstition. In this paper I will examine how feminist witchcraft manages to achieve this resistance. By drawing on Bourdieu's symbolic violence, Durkheim's writings on ritual, and Butler's concept of gender as performance, I will show that magic can be “real” and act on power dynamics in the real-world.

I offer as a jumping off point for this analysis Chris Klassen's explanation of what initially attracted her to witchcraft: "it was a way of accessing power that for a ten-year old, urban, Mennonite girl was decidedly lacking" (2008, p. 1).

## 2 The Symbols

Throughout his work Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of symbolic power, which – at its most basic – "is a power of constructing reality", primarily through "symbolic structures" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 166). It is a form of "soft" power in that it does not involve physical coercion. So while symbolic power does result in domination, which Bourdieu terms symbolic violence, it is a domination that "can be exercised only with the complicity of those who [...] are subject to it" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164) because it involves the "dominated adopt[ing] the 'prevailing opinion,' the world-view developed by the dominant, and along with it, a self-image shaped by the dominant" (Krais, 1993). Furthermore, because the dominated share in the symbolic system that oppresses them the mechanisms of symbolic power are misrecognized and sublimated into "what is proper", rendering it invisible (Krais, 1993). Unsurprisingly, one area Bourdieu identified as pervaded by symbolic power is gender relations; in fact in his essay *La Domination Masculine* he argues that it "constitutes the essential aspect of male domination" (1990, p. 11). In our society, "women have been extra-environmentals ... to those citadels in which thought processes have been spun out, creating a net of meaning to capture reality" (Daly, 1977, p. 6). What this means is that, in addition to the overt discrimination and violence, women face a more subtle form of oppression in that they participate in a world whose symbolic meaning was constructed by men and as a result disempowers women.

From this perspective, banal, everyday acts of face-to-face interaction lose their harmlessness; they converge into a steady stream of symbolically violent acts that push women back again and again in the prevailing division of labor between the sexes, without this violence being recognized as such. (Krais, 1993)

It is the symbolic nature of this form of power that allows feminist witchcraft to engage with and resist it, because magic operates on the level of symbols. Bourdieu himself often describes symbolic power as taking the form of "social magic", particularly when real-world effects are produced by symbolic rituals, such as a judge pronouncing sentence or a priest performing a marriage (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 125). Interestingly, this accords perfectly with van Baal's religious anthropological description of magic as part of "constituting a system of continuous communication between man and his universe" (1971, p. 267), i.e Bourdieu's symbolic structure.

In order to understand how feminist witchcraft responds to the symbolic violence of male domination we must first understand its thealogy. The very use of the word "thealogy" already constitutes part of how feminist witchcraft works within the system of signs to change the dynamic of power. 'Thea' is the feminine form of 'theo', which means deity; thealogy is used instead of theology in

order to emphasize the importance of the Goddess in feminist witchcraft tradition (Klassen, 2008, p. 31). Feminist witchcraft is a polytheistic religion that worships both a Goddess and a God<sup>1</sup>. The Goddess is not merely the traditional Judeo-Christian God in feminine garb but:

Stripped of dependence on images, concepts and systems that are largely the construct of male-dominated theology and institutions, we are freed to see God as we do rather than according to the sanctioned models of a church (Giles, 1982, p. 3)

And thus the Goddess is constructed as a challenge to “the symbol of the Father God” who is both “sustained as plausible by patriarchy” and “make[s] its mechanisms for the oppression of woman appear right and fitting”, i.e. the symbolic structure (Daly, 1977, p. 13). As Starhawk – the founder of Reclaimed Witchcraft one of the most prominent traditions within feminist witchcraft – explains:

... in the areas as deeply rooted as the relations between the sexes, true social change can only come about when the myths and symbols of our culture are themselves changed. The symbol of the Goddess conveys the spiritual power both to challenge systems of oppression and to create new, life-oriented cultures. (1999, p. 35)

This is accomplished at the most basic level in that the Goddess positions feminist witchcraft – and the religious authority and symbolic power that are derived from active participation in religion – as open, welcoming, and accessible to women. Bado-Fralick (2005, p. 27) expresses this vividly when she writes “in the Craft<sup>2</sup>, there were no ornate doors through which I—a woman—could not pass.” Furthermore, the Goddess legitimizes, and in fact celebrates, the feminine through its deification and allows women to “move beyond narrow, constricting roles” in that it “inspires women to see ourselves as divine” (Starhawk, 1999, p. 34). In other words, the Goddess is a tool of symbolic power used to construct a symbolic structure in opposition to that of patriarchy. What is interesting is that feminist witchcraft expresses a sincere religious belief in the Goddess, while simultaneously consciously constructed the Goddess as a form of resistance. This symbolic resistance (which is just as real as the symbolic violence it resists) is supplemented by feminist witchcraft’s quasi-historical mythology.

As noted above, a key feature of symbolic violence is its invisibility. This holds true for sexism as well, “the exploitative sexual caste system could not be perpetuated without the consent of victims” (Daly, 1977, p. 2). Thus, rendering the symbolic structure of sexism visible is an important part of resisting patriarchy. While some feminists do this through detailed academic analysis, feminist witchcraft fights symbols with symbols, in the form of myth, specifically the myth of the “Burning Time”. Myths are not just stories, but “semiological systems”; they can be understood as signifiers for an entire symbolic structure (Barthes, 1972, p. 110-4). This can be seen in the way that established social

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<sup>1</sup> Some forms, such as Dianic Witchcraft, worship the Goddess nearly exclusively (Krais, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> The Craft is another name for witchcraft.

myths act as “the unitary mental construct which guarantees that the cosmic order conforms with the order that this society has in fact already established within its frontiers” (Debord, 1983). Feminist witchcraft has a counter-myth; it refers to the witch-hunts of the early modern/late middle ages as the Burning Time. The myth of the Burning Time describes these witch-hunts as deliberate persecution of women – and particularly of witches – by a patriarchal, church dominated society that felt threatened by their power (Klassen, 2008, p. 43). It is mythical in that historical basis for this version of events is tenuous at best. However, this does not make it less effective as a tool of opposition. The myth serves as a concrete image of female oppression, rendering it visible. On the basis of this visible form “feminist reclaimed the concept of the witch as a symbol of feminine power that stood in opposition to patriarchy” (Magliocco, 2001, p. 3). Because of the invisibility of the symbolic violence perpetrated against women, it can only be countered on the level of myth.

I have delineated two key symbols – the Goddess and the myth of the Burning Time – feminist witchcraft deploys in response to patriarchy. However witchcraft is not a religion of dogmas but of practices, specifically magic. It is in these magic rituals that we find feminist witchcraft’s full power as tool of resistance against patriarchy.

### 3 The Ritual

Feminist witchcraft is far from the only religion that revolves around magic rituals. In the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim looks at Australian aboriginal religious practices, which, while different in content from those of feminist witchcraft, are similar enough in form to serve as a framework for understanding how magic “works”. In seeking to understand what it is for magic to work Durkheim rejects, what he terms anthropological, explanations that merely give origins to the specifics of this or that ritual (1995, p. 361). His insight was to look beyond supposed physical effects of a ritual (such as ensuring the reproduction of a totemic species) to the “power of rites over minds” (1995, p. 364). He goes on to argue:

The true justification of religious practices is not in the apparent ends they pursue but in their invisible influences over the consciousness and in their manner of affecting our state of mind. (1995, p. 364)

Which is remarkably similar to the widespread definition of magic in feminist witchcraft as “the art of changing consciousness at will” (Dion Fortune cited in Starhawk, 1999). What Durkheim has in mind here is the ability of rituals to “remake the individual and the group morally” and “to revitalize the most essential elements of the collective consciousness and conscience”(1995, p. 374, 379). It is not a far leap from Durkheim’s “collective consciousness” to Bourdieu’s “symbolic structure”. In fact, Durkheim goes on to argue that the ritual is necessarily social, and relies on the group setting for its source of authority to produce a certain state of mind in the individual (1995, p. 269-71).

So for Durkheim we see how magical rituals can “work” in that they produce a desired symbolic structure. However, while the rituals examined by Durkheim

were concerned with the reproduction of a symbolic order (1995, p. 374-80) those of feminist witchcraft seek to challenge a prevailing and oppressive system. In this they are more akin to the folk magic and devil worship of Latin American plantation workers studied by Taussig where:

In a myriad of improbable ways, magic and rite can strengthen the critical consciousness that a devastatingly hostile reality forces on the people laboring in the plantations and mines. Without the legacy of culture and without its rhetorical figures, images, fables, metaphors, and other imaginative creations, this consciousness cannot function. (1980, p. 232)

I will now take a closer look at the specifics of feminist witchcraft rituals to understand how “magic takes language, symbols, and intelligibility to their outermost limits, to explore life and thereby to change its destination” (Taussig, 1980, p. 15).

All witchcraft rituals begin with the casting of the circle, which creates a space “on the boundaries of ordinary space and time; it is ‘between the worlds’ of the seen and unseen” in which the ritual will take place (Starhawk, 1999, p. 83). In many ways the circle is akin Foucault’s concept of heterotopia which are spaces both outside of society but at the same time “have a function in relation to all the space that remains” (Foucault, 1984). It is this heterotopic nature of the circle that allows the ritual to act upon and transform the symbolic structure of society. The creation of the circle itself is accomplished through nothing more than the manipulation of signs, both verbal (in the form of chanting) and physical (usually by “cutting” a circular space around the participants with a ritual knife).

It is impossible to give a general description of witchcraft rituals because each ceremony is customized by and for the participants. This is not to say that they created *ex nihilo*; witches will draw on whatever traditions they feel close to, often those of the coven<sup>3</sup> to which they belong. However, personal and immanent participation remains a key feature of witchcraft rituals. Witches do not go through set prescribed ceremonies but have a direct link to the symbols they invoke. Often tools and talisman – such as wands and ritual knives or a pen for a ritual to bring academic success – will be used, however it would be a mistake to identify the magic with the physical objects. “The mind works magic,” while the tools are “tangible representatives of unseen forces” (Starhawk, 1999, p. 87). Just as the myth of the Burning Time rendered symbolic violence visible, the tools and chants of the ritual render visible the intentions of the witches and the forces, i.e. the symbolic power that stands in their way.

In this way “magical thinking” drops its cloak of transcendental escapism and materializes as a political counterperception - an alternative worldview that summons the creative and prophetic power of the multitude and necessitates acts of conviction in order to realize transformation. (Gach, nd)

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<sup>3</sup> The term for a group of witches who practice together. Somewhat analogous to a church but with far fewer members, traditionally no more than 13 but this is not strictly followed.

To take a simple example: I was under no illusion that the spell I cast before writing this paper would, on its own, result in a good paper. Nor was I under the impression that the candles and figurines I used would causally affect my paper in any way. However, this does not mean that the spell didn't "work". The ritual raised my energy and focused my efforts. The blessing of the books, pens, laptop, and paper invested them with magic; it turned them into more than mere physical object, i.e. symbols. In other words, the ritual allowed me to wield symbolic power and create a symbolic structure in which I was a successful paper writer, and even after the conclusion of the ritual my books, pens, laptop, and computer paper continued to serve as symbols within that structure.

Feminist witchcraft does the same thing, but in opposition to the far more serious issue of patriarchy. Sometimes the rituals are center explicitly on issues of gender, such as the "hex spell on the enemies of women and peace" preformed by the Susan B. Anthony Coven in response to a specific spate of rapes in Richmond, California (Budapest, 2009). However, more generally, the practice of magic by women – even when not used directly with respect to issues of gender – grants them symbolic power that they normally do not have access to, and thus is a form of resistance to patriarchy itself. Recall the quote from the introduction: "[witchcraft] was a way of accessing power that for a ten-year old, urban, Mennonite girl was decidedly lacking" (Klassen, 2008, p. 1)

## 4 The Self

While the ritual is primarily social, feminist witchcraft has an additional, more personal effect. It allows for the construction of a gender identity that escapes the male/female binary without giving up "womanness", namely that of witch.

Judith Butler has argued that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler, 1990, p. 25). The point here is not that simply that gender identities are social constructs, but that gender is not a static attribute, something you are, but "an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing" (Butler, 2004, p. 1). Butler often described this doing of gender in terms of performance. Similarly, "witch" is not simply a static label, but is immanently tied to the practice of magic ritual, which are – above all – elaborate performance of construction. In this sense, "doing witch" can be understood in the same way that Butler describes "doing gender".

Of course, the identity of 'witch' does not occupy the same space as the identity of 'woman'. It is more like drag, which Butler analyzes as "parodic recontextualization" in that it allows to "see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity" (Butler, 1990, p. 138) because the witch is a different kind of woman, a woman that is both extremely powerful and extremely caring.

... we in Reclaiming call ourselves Witches for the very reason that others do not. It's an in-your-face word. We, as feminists and people who honor our own divinity as well as our interdependence with the rest of Gaia, the Mother, reclaim the term Witch. (NightMare, 1998)

In fact, feminist witchcraft begins to approach the level of a complete technology of the self in that it

... permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform I themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1984, p. 18)

So not only does the magic performed in the rituals of feminist witchcraft affect the world – through its manipulation of signs – but it also affects the practitioners, and in fact allows them to construct themselves in opposition to patriarchy.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has argued that the employment of magic by feminist witchcraft produces real effects by meeting and confronting the symbolic violence directed at women on the level of symbols, and manipulating those symbols through the use of ritual. Furthermore, these ritual performances also reconstruct the identity of the witches as a challenge to heteronormativity, and by extension patriarchy. In short: magic is real, not in an occult sense but in the sense that it can be a source of power.

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