

## **The Monstrous Girl: Teen Witches, Abjection and the Horror of Femininity**

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In her now classic study of gender and monstrosity, *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed describes how in certain cultures, “A young girl who had prophetic dreams at the time of her menarche was frequently singled out as a shaman or witch” (Creed 74). While this association between womanhood and witchery is hardly startling – approximately 75% of those executed as witches in Europe were women (Thurston 10) – a more interesting connection arising from this superstition is the belief that adolescent girls are uniquely attuned to the occult.

The history of the deeply-held association between women and witchcraft is a long and complex one. Over the centuries, numerous historians have sought to unravel and dissect the closely intertwined cultural connections that bond femininity to the occult. In their now famous article “Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers” Ehrenreich and English posit a romanticised history of female healers and midwives, “doctors without degrees,” whose potent knowledge of herbal medicine and the inscrutable workings of female biology earned the ire of a growing male-dominated medical establishment, ultimately transforming these gentle nurses into the horrifying witches of the Medieval and Early Modern periods. Another theory, put forward by the mythologist Joseph Campbell, maintains that the female association with seemingly magical processes, the giving of life during pregnancy and childbirth, as well their power to transform herbs and other ingredients into nourishing meals, created a belief that women had access to some occult mystical knowledge hidden from male eyes. On a biological level, the vision of woman as witch seems to be tied to the popularity of a medieval schema which conceived of femininity as defined by an unsettling interiority. According to Jack Hartnell, the contrast between the “conspicuously external nature of the penis and testes and what [medieval doctors] saw as the vacant interiority of the vagina and uterus” signalled a disturbing belief that male “presence” existed in eternal opposition to “female absence” (232). Based on this theory, femininity is thus conceived not only as a passive receptacle, but as a mysterious absence, a dark cavern that refuses to easily yield its secrets.

Considering this history of woman as both biological and existential Other, the conflation of femininity with the uncanny emerges as a somewhat predictable addition to the

Medieval and Early-Modern litany of feminine monstrosity. In traditional psychoanalysis, femininity emerges as the archetype of Otherness, defined oppositionally against a male standard; it is the embodiment of lack. Sigmund Freud even goes so far as to remind us that the monstrous head of the Medusa invariably recalls the horror associated with female genitalia. However, while much has been written about this convergence of femininity and horror, the ingrained cultural and historical ties that bind women to witchcraft, little consideration has been given to a truly unique manifestation of this “Monstrous Feminine”: the teenage witch, a truly “monstrous girl”. Although the popular construction of the witch has largely polarised into the binaries of enchantress or hag, the teenage witch exists between these spaces, in the liminal stage of adolescence. As a teenager she is situated in an intermediary state, somewhere between child and woman. She is neither sexual nor asexual, neither adult nor infant. Instead, she is a being that exists on the cusp on adult sexuality, on the verge of womanhood. In this paper I contend that it is this state of becoming that lends unique potency to the teenage witch as a culture figure. Often mischievous, occasionally malevolent, the adolescent witch is an archetype who serves to embody a wide range of cultural anxieties about femininity, adolescence and the teenage experience. In her metamorphic state, transitioning between childhood and womanhood, she epitomises the uncanniness, the suspicious interiority our culture associates with femininity as whole; yet, because she is only just emerging into this feminine identity, the teen witch also embodies unique cultural anxieties about the fluidity, the uncertainty and the subversive power of adolescence.

Since the birth of a unique teen culture amidst the affluence of post-war America, the teenage witch has occupied a unique position in the American cultural imagination. In the 1950s – as teen girls were forging a unique identity distinct from their parents and defined by its own language, rituals and cultural ephemera – the adolescent witch was already bubbling away. In Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953), witchcraft hysteria, if not the actual practice, is associated with a group of teenage girls. Although an overt allegory for the dangers of McCarthyism set amongst the terror of the Salem witch trials, *The Crucible* also appears preoccupied with the threat posed by adolescent femininity, its power to upend social norms and undermine community values. Indeed, as Emerson W. Baker observes in his historical analysis of the trials, while many of the accusers who condemned their fellow Puritans as witches may have been young girls, many were adult women or even men. Consequently, Miller’s choice to ground Salem’s witch panic in the inscrutable, potentially hormone-driven

actions of teenage girls, appears to be a deliberate response to an increasingly anxious cultural construction of feminine adolescence as sinister, disruptive and unsettling.

However, while Miller's play frames hormonal teenage emotion as an hysterical contagion that ultimately proves destructive to an entire community, the 1950s also provided a more complex, more nuanced depiction of the adolescent witch in the form of Cecy Elliott from Ray Bradbury's short story "The April Witch", published in 1952. From the outset of the short tale, which initially appeared in that most middle-American of magazines *The Saturday Evening Post*, Cecy is presented as a thoroughly uncanny figure. Cecy belongs to the Elliott family, a sort of rural Midwestern counterpart to the cosmopolitan *New Yorker* staple, the Addams Family. The Elliotts occupy an ancient rambling home somewhere in the Illinois countryside, and the family is comprised of a variety of standard monster-movie ghouls, including vampires, mummies and other assorted creatures. Cecy, however, is perhaps the most unusual member of the family. Bradbury describes her on numerous occasions as a witch, and she is, of course, the eponymous "April Witch". At the same time, however, Cecy is also a delicate, dreamy teenage girl, straining against the confines of home and family. In another story featuring the character, we are told that Cecy is the "the fairest and most special daughter of the Family" possessed of a "talent for touching other people's ears, thence inward to their minds and still further their dreams [...]" (Bradbury 17). Cecy, it is revealed, possesses the power of astral flight. In her sleeping moments, she can leave her body behind and travel, spiritually, across the land, even possessing other people and objects.

Cecy, then, exists as a creature both physical and spiritual. A prolific dreamer, she spends her days sequestered high in her attic room, lying immobile in a soporific state. In many ways, she appears to embody typical parental and societal anxieties about teenage girls: she is isolated, insular, antisocial and strange. She sleeps all day and night, her thoughts and mental wanderings are inscrutable and troubling. Yet, Bradbury tells us that Cecy's physical inertia is emblematic of an active mental life:

So, lying asleep, Cecy inhaled the seasons and heard the rumblings of towns on the prairies over the mountains and if you asked her at meals she would tell you the violent or serene occupations of strangers ten thousand miles away. Her mouth was always full of gossip of people being born in Boston or dying in Monterey, heard during the night as her eyes were shut. (Bradbury 18)

In this way, Cecy reveals herself as a thoroughly uncanny figure. She resides in the liminal space between sleep and waking, physical and spiritual, tangible and intangible. She embodies the instability and ambiguity that are the essence of the uncanny. Indeed, if we turn our attention all the way back to 1906, when the theory of the uncanny was originally formulated by the psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, we can clearly see that his definition of this phenomenon is intimately linked to the notion of “intellectual uncertainty” (Freud 233). Jentsch’s uncanny is the terror that is evoked when one is unable to effectively categorise a being or entity, when we are unable to decipher whether a thing is living or dead, human or inhuman. While the later Freud articulation of the uncanny narrows the definition of the experience down to the unsettling feelings that emerge when we are confronted with “something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (Freud 241), both Freud and Jentsch identify the uncanny with the transgression of boundaries. For Jentsch, this transgression is connected to those entities which refuse definitive intellectual categorisation; for Freud, it is tied to the disturbing sensation experienced when that which has been repressed or hidden in the psyche re-emerges from the recesses of the subconscious. In both cases, the uncanny is that which eludes categorisation and transgresses boundaries. In “The April Witch”, Cecy’s paranormal nature evokes a similarly unsettling sensation. She exists in an eternally liminal state, between physical and spiritual, sleeping and waking, reality and fantasy. Her primary characteristics: her capacity for psychic wandering and perpetual slumber appear as fantastic exaggerations of typical adolescent characteristics. Yet, at the same time, her capacity for astral wandering and the possession of other forms suggests a rather literal uncanniness:

Into the air, over the valleys, under the stars, above a river, a pond, flew Cecy. Invisible as autumn winds, fresh as the breath of clover rising from twilight fields, she flew. [...] She lived in dandelion ghosts or sweet clear liquids rising from the musky earth. Farewell summer, thought Cecy. I’ll be in every living thing in the world tonight. (Bradbury 21)

Later, the young witch tells us that she “can live in anything at all – a pebble, a crocus, or a praying mantis” (Bradbury 22). In her fluidity, her ability to traverse the boundaries of both her own body and those of others, Cecy is thus emblematic of a rather distinct form of horror, one intimately related to the uncanny: the abject. Coined by the theorist Julia Kristeva, the abject refers to those things which do not “respect borders, positions, rules, [. . .] that which disturbs identity, system, order” (2). The abject is a breakdown in the distinctions that we

must maintain in order to exist as human beings. It is the erosion of the boundary between self and other, subject and object. The abject manifests in our revulsion at the sight of blood or other bodily fluids; it is a reminder of our essential corporeality and that we, as human beings, are merely physical objects vulnerable to external penetration and destruction. It is this sense of the abject that so often defines what we term monstrous or evil. As the author Barbara Creed notes:

[T]here is, of course, a sense in which the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. (71)

Cecy's astral wanderings certainly adhere to this construction of the monstrous as she regularly crosses corporeal and existential borders. However, while such notions of the abject are often characteristic of what Creed calls the "monstrous feminine" – the horror associated with abject, border-defying physicality of menstruation, child birth and other female bodily processes – I would argue that Cecy's abject nature speaks to what could instead be termed the "monstrous girl". Her abject fluidity speaks not to anxieties about mature female sexuality but to pronounced post-war concerns about female adolescence. Cecy's capacity to enter other bodies is explicitly connected to adolescent sexual fantasy throughout the story. At one point, Cecy is described in rather erotic terms as having "touched perfume to her throat and stretched out, trembling and apprehensive, on her four-poster, as a moon the color of milk rose over Illinois country, turning rivers to cream and roads to platinum" (Bradbury 22). The language utilised to describe Cecy is clearly evocative sexuality and erotic fantasy. Moreover, as the story progresses, the seventeen-year-old Cecy ultimately uses her witchy powers to possess the body of an older girl so that she can experience the pleasure of first love at a local dance. In these moments, Cecy serves as a literal embodiment of the adolescent proclivity for fantasy and erotic day dreaming. However, rather than simply dreaming of an ideal date with a handsome young man, Cecy's magical abilities allow her to take possession of another body, that of ideal self: an older, more confident girl.

In her revolutionary study of embodiment and feminine corporeality, Elizabeth Grosz describes how "the adolescent body is often experienced as awkward, alienating, an undesired biological imposition" (77). It is for this reason, Grosz contends that adolescence is

“the period that the subject feels the greatest discord between the body image and the lived body, the philosophical desire to transcend corporeality and its urges may be dated from this period” (77). By traversing the boundaries of her body and entering the bodies of others, Bradbury’s April Witch enacts this very process of transcending corporeality. However, rather than being confined to fantasy, Cecy can quite literally escape her own physicality and the impositions of awkward adolescent biology, projecting herself into a confident, sexually-mature double. Nevertheless, despite her abject nature and acts of witchy mischievousness Cecy, challenges the notion that evil is inherent to the feminine or that the witch’s “evil powers [...] as part of her ‘feminine’ nature” (Creed 76). Indeed, Cecy is ultimately a complex character. While the hysterical and hormonal teenage girls in Miller’s *Crucible* unleash chaos and brutality, Cecy is capable of complex decision-making and moral action. At the end of the story, she chooses to vacate the body she has possessed and abandon her fantasy romance. Counteracting common anxieties about unbridled and selfish adolescent sexuality, Cecy makes the choice to abandon sexual gratification rather than impede the autonomy of another woman. As such, while Cecy, as a teen witch, embodies a host of, primarily adult, anxieties about adolescent sexuality, she also shows that such anxieties may be unfounded as the adolescent is capable of complex moral actions.

This more nuanced vision of the adolescent sorceress can also be seen in Robert Eggers’ 2015 period masterpiece *The Witch* (2015) and the reconfigured Sabrina Spellman (of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* fame) who appears Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa’s recent comic-book series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2014 – present). In both texts the manifestation of the supernatural and the protagonist’s entrance into the occult realm of witchcraft is demarcated by the onset of puberty. In *The Witch*, a seventeenth-century Puritan family is bewitched and besieged by satanic forces after their teenage daughter Thomasin enters womanhood. As her mother whispers in hushed tones that Thomasin “hath begat the sign of her womanhood”, the family is increasingly tormented by inexplicable acts of maleficia. The demonic occurrences that torment the household appear intimately linked to Thomasin’s menarche and her burgeoning womanhood. In particular, it is worth noting that alongside other strange happenings, the goats which Thomasin milks start to produce blood instead, an instance whose framing evokes images of menstruation. As in “The April Witch”, the uncanny nature of adolescent femininity is manifested in acts of witchcraft and the subversive powers of the teen witch. Likewise, in Aguirre-Sacasa’s *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the eponymous teen witch’s entrance into womanhood is constructed as an initiation

into occult wisdom and power. The first arc of the comic deals with Sabrina's baptism as a witch, a ceremony during which she will have to decide to embrace witchcraft, pledge her allegiance to Satan and sign his book. Significantly, Sabrina's baptism and her burgeoning identity as a witch are both explicitly framed in terms of puberty and the process of navigating nascent female sexuality. Indeed, across all the issues of the comic, Sabrina's entrance into womanhood is presented as being coterminous with her entry into the esoteric realm of witchcraft. Describing her impending baptism, her rebirth as a witch, Sabrina's Aunt Zelda draws on a language of mystical femininity that conflates the magic of the moon with the potency of menstrual blood:

As discussed, the ceremony would customarily take place on the first full moon after your sixteenth birthday... but I've already had your astral chart prepared ... and your sixteenth birthday falls not just on a full moon, but on the best kind of full moon ... a blood-moon... the same night as a lunar eclipse... on Samhain... (Chapter 3)

As part of the ceremony, Sabrina is required not only to ride a goat to the meeting of witches deep within in the forest (an image clearly derived from Dürer's sixteenth-century print of a witch riding backwards on a goat), but also to slaughter that goat. Covered in the goat's blood, Sabrina's baptism appears not merely as an initiation into witchcraft, but also as an initiation into womanhood.

Like "The April Witch", written over half a century prior, both *The Witch* and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, portray witchcraft and the onset of magical capabilities as coterminous with puberty and entrance into womanhood. However, unlike the Early-Modern scholars who viewed evil and sorcery as inherent to women because of their ostensibly inscrutable biology, these text present the process of being and becoming that defines adolescence as a complex one. Rather than being impelled towards evil by an inherently abject corporeality, each of these teen witches is ultimately tasked with enacting her own agency and choosing whether or not to embrace evil. While Cecy ultimately makes the decision to quit her occupancy of another woman's body, Sabrina and Thomasin are more ambiguous figures. In the finale of Aguirre-Sacasa's first arc of *Sabrina*, the eponymous protagonist is left with the decision of whether to embrace the occult or reject it in favour of a more normal existence. While in the closing scenes of *The Witch* Thomasin embraces witchcraft as rejection of the patriarchal family structure from which she has fled, and, in

doing so, she discovers liberation and sisterhood amongst the community of witches who lurk deep within the New England woods.

The adolescent witch, this monstrous girl, is an ambiguous figure. She is marginal and, in her adolescent state, she is liminal. On the threshold of womanhood, she represents an unsettling fluidity and seems to amplify some of the earliest medical, societal and cultural concerns about the relationship between feminine biology and the occult. This foregrounding of the adolescent feminine as the source of subversive power is unsurprising when we consider the centrality of teenage girlhood to popular depictions of the mystical and the supernatural. As Deborah Martin observes in her pioneering study of the subject, “[a]dolescent femininity is central to the narrative economy of the gothic, both literary and visual” (135). In Martin’s conception, adolescent femininity is a liminal mode of self-estrangement, identity formation and biological metamorphosis. Rather than a rigid existential category, it is a contested state of being. As the female adolescent exists in a nebulous state between child and woman, she challenges conventional notions of subjectivity and thus engenders a profoundly uncanny anxiety. As a period of identity formation and psycho-sexual development teenage girlhood is often figured as disturbing because of how it breaks down pre-existent existential categories. Horror fiction abounds in images of teenage girls whose liminality is manifested in violence, monstrosity and pain. From Stephen King’s 1974 novel *Carrie* (and its 1976 cinematic adaptation) to the Canadian werewolf film *Ginger Snaps* (2000), menarche and adolescent development have been repeatedly associated with terror and the supernatural. However, in the texts discussed in this paper, a more complex picture of female evil emerges. In the oft-neglected figure of the teen witch, we are confronted with questions of agency and morality that are regularly omitted from the cultural construction of woman as evil or abject. In these, teenage sorceresses, we see reflected not only our own cultural anxieties about the subversive power of adolescent femininity, but a broader series of questions that interrogate and undermine the historic relationship between female corporeality and occult evils.