

The cultural history of witches

17th century: The Wayward Sisters

"Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and caldron bubble," chanted Shakespeare's three witches in *Macbeth*. Representing evil, darkness, chaos and conflict, they popularized the image of the cauldron and were a sisterhood to be feared.

19th century: The fairy-tale witch

From Hansel and Gretel's old, wicked and deformed woman living apart from society in the woods to the narcissistic youth-obsessed queen of *Snow White* and the wicked stepmother in *Cinderella*, witches were the baddies of the Grimms' *Fairy Tales* and still dominate childhood stories today.

The Pre-Raphaelite muse

Known for depicting female beauty and mystery, the pre-Raphaelites changed discussion of witches by depicting them as priestesses or prophets. Catherine Spooner said: "Sexy witches emerge in painting, classical witches like *Medea* (by Frederick Sandys) from Greek mythology and presenting them as really powerful attractive women and femme fatales."

1960s: 'Bewitched' and Wicca

The emergence of second-wave feminism coincided with the emergence of Wicca. Drawing on ancient paganism, Wiccans worshipped either the Moon Goddess or the Horned God of Fertility. The most popular depiction of witchcraft at the time was "Bewitched," about nose-twitching Samantha, who was battling between the dual roles of perfect housewife and witch.

1980s: You may remove your shoes!

Stereotypical depictions of witches began to receive backlash, and Roald Dahl's witches – who appeared to be normal women but removed their shoes, wigs and faces to reveal hideous disfigurements – came under fire. Catherine Itzin, a feminist activist and author, said it was an example of "how boys learn to become men who hate women."

1990s: The MTV generation

"In the 1990s, witches just go from strength to strength," Catherine Spooner said. From the irreverent and empowered "Sabrina the Teenage Witch" to the lesbian Wicca witch, Willow, in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" via "Charmed," "Practical Magic," "The Craft" and countless more, there was a resurgence in the popularity of the witch. "I think that's partly to do with the rise of Wicca. It was becoming much more well known, much more popular and much more acceptable, and in turn, the programs made it more acceptable."

The Muggle-born witch

The end of the decade saw the release of the first two "Harry Potter" books, and Hermione Granger cemented witchcraft as a skill, requiring studiousness and endless practice. Witches were now allowed to be like wizards – the more acceptable side of magic. "The idea that you have to undergo initiation, learn rituals and earn your craft changed in popular cultural representations," Spooner said. "That's very different from the 17th century, when the witch is this uneducated person."

A new broom

Witches continue to dominate popular culture. This past year, big screen releases have included "Blair Witch" and "The Witch," set in New England. There are many welcome examples of stereotype subversion too, like "Witches of the East End." "American Horror Story: Coven" features a black witch and a witch with Down syndrome.

Courtesy of Big Issue North / INSP.ngo

The feminist witch

Witches have been variously feared, burned, respected and celebrated through history. But what does our depiction of these magical figures say about us?

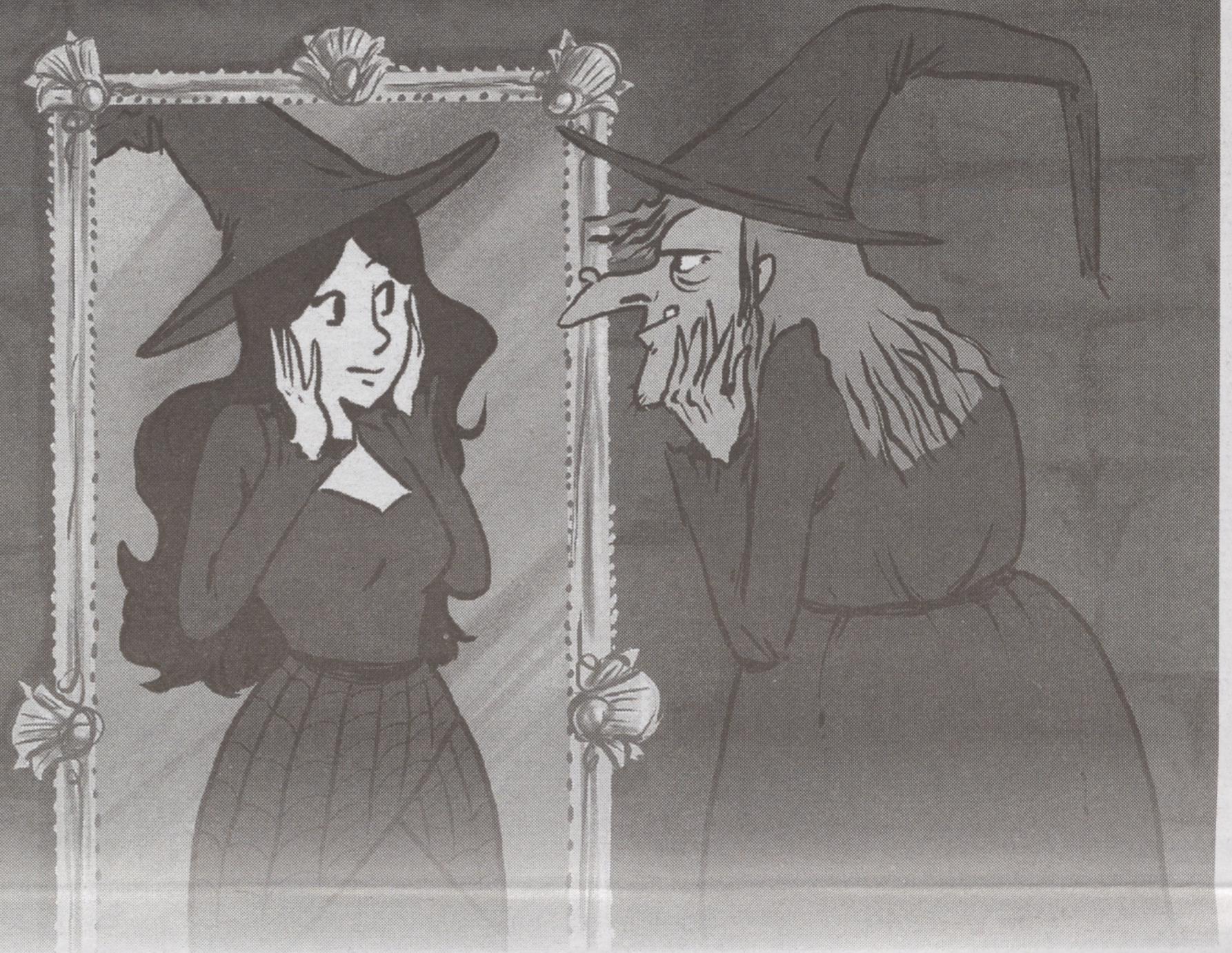


ILLUSTRATION BY AMY EVANS OF TIGER TEA

BY ANTONIA CHARLESWORTH
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Last year, online retailer Amazon was forced to pull a range of hyper-sexualized Halloween costumes for girls as young as age 4 from its online marketplace – an extreme example of the increasing sexualization of Halloween.

A fearsome, hook-nosed, broomstick-riding hag happily still offers respite, but for every scary witch costume, there is an array of sexy enchantress costumes available too.

Far from originating in student Halloween bar crawls, the sexualized witch can be identified as early as 1486 when Heinrich Kramer, a German Catholic clergyman, wrote "Malleus Maleficarum," a handbook for witch hunters.

The handbook explained that witchcraft is a woman's crime because woman is "more carnal than man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations ... witchcraft came from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable."

The charges levied against these insatiable women included making men's genitals disappear or stealing them, keeping them in nests or boxes and feeding them oats and corn. This, wrote Kramer before providing detailed methods to catch the temptresses, was a matter of common report. Far from being written off as the god-fearing, woman-hating crackpot he clearly was, Kramer gained a bit of a following.

An estimated 40,000 to 60,000 people

were executed during the witch trials of the early modern period. Of course, they weren't all women – only around 85 percent.

Execution by burning – evoking hellfire and flames of passion – was deemed appropriate punishment for such crimes. In Europe, it was the preferred way to kill a witch because it was more painful. The confessions that led up to it were often elicited through sexually humiliating torture techniques, such as in Italy, where accused women were forced to sit on red-hot stools, preventing them from performing sexual acts with the devil.

"The image of the burning witch is very symbolic, particularly for people at that time who would have believed in hell and eternal flames," said Catherine Spooner, a professor at Lancaster University in England and an expert on witches. "It's representing that in a very physical and literal way, and it retains its power now."

It's easy to see why modern feminism claimed witches as its martyrs. Matilda Joslyn Gage, a writer involved in the suffrage movement, published a book in 1893 that claimed witches were pagan priestesses worshipping the Great Goddess. In 1973, second-wave feminists Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English put forward in a pamphlet the idea that the persecuted women were traditional healers and midwives.

"The witch became very important for feminists from the '60s and '70s, right up

See WITCHES, page 11