

Introduction

Living in modern Western societies, we are surrounded by witches. People put on pointy hats and dress up as them at Halloween. They tell their children fairy tales about how witches live in gingerbread houses, or sit them down in front of films about schools of witchcraft and wizardry. Some folk enjoy horror movies in which witches butcher students out in the woods; others prefer to read fantasy novels about witches flying through the air. Historians write books about people who were accused of being witches centuries ago, while activists campaign for memorials and pardons for these long-dead individuals. Allegations of witch-like Satanists continue to enthrall conspiracy theorists, and politicians complain that they are the victims of witch hunts. Amidst all this, hundreds of thousands of people openly declare themselves to be witches – that being a witch is their religious identity. How can we make sense of all this? What does it all mean? Which witch is which?

The words ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’ have a very long history in the English language, one stretching right back to the Early Middle Ages. As is the case with many words, their meanings have changed and broadened over time, with different people using them to mean different things. We now have a situation where, as noted by historian Ronald Hutton (2017: ix–x), there are four broad meanings of the term ‘witch’ in circulation. Each of these meanings in turn has its own complexities and subtypes, thus resulting in the incredibly varied and quite confusing array of different ideas about what a witch can be in the modern world.

The first (and probably the oldest) of these meanings is that the witch is a malevolent person who harms others through the manipulation of supernatural forces. This is the witch who practises *maleficium*, who curses, hexes, or bewitches people and their property. This is what the term ‘witch’ would have meant to the vast majority of folk in England from the early medieval period right through to the nineteenth century. Despite having their own word for these individuals, the English were certainly not unique in believing in such evil-doers; to the French, they were *sorcières*, to Germans *hexen*, to Spaniards *brujas*, and so forth. More broadly, societies throughout recorded history and across the world have believed in witches of this type, giving them names from their own native languages. Sometimes, as a result of colonialism, they have also embraced English and other European terms; the Mapuche people of Chile and Argentina, for instance, adopted the Spanish *brujería* as a synonym for their indigenous word *kalkutun* (Bacigalupo 2007: 20–1).

As malefactors, witches of this sort have typically been feared and hated, and people accused of witchcraft have often been persecuted or killed, a situation that continues in many countries today. Across Europe and the European colonies in the Americas, witch persecutions reached their height in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries, the early modern period, at a time when these societies increasingly viewed the witch as a Satanist, a figure who travelled to the witches' sabbath to worship the Devil, desecrate the Christian Eucharist, and engage in incestuous orgies. (For good overviews of early modern witch trials see Scarre and Callow 2001; Levack 2016.) Although these European trials effectively ended by the eighteenth century, fears about malicious witchcraft remained part of folk belief in many regions of the Western world well into the twentieth century (Favret-Saada 1980; Davies 2013; Waters 2019; Black 2020). In more recent decades, Westerners have also become accustomed to the malicious witch as a staple of horror cinema, a figure familiar from the likes of *Suspiria* (1977), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *The Witch* (2015). Moreover, early modern fears about secretive Satanic groups, sometimes referred to as witches, have repeatedly resurfaced as conspiracy theories, most famously in the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and early 1990s (Victor 1993; Introvigne 2016: 372–461) and the QAnon phenomenon of the late 2010s and 2020s.

The second meaning of the word 'witch' is far broader and refers to a person who uses supernatural forces either to harm or to help. In this sense, a witch can be either malevolent or benevolent; it is their possession and use of unusual power, not their code of ethics, that defines them. This was a meaning employed primarily by those writing with an explicitly Christian agenda – whether medieval Catholic clergymen or later Protestant reformers – and largely reflected their desire to condemn people engaged in forms of healing, divination, and fortune-telling outside of an ecclesiastical remit, often because they thought these individuals were indirectly reliant on the powers of demons. Only in the nineteenth century does it appear that this broader meaning of the word 'witch' gained wider use among the English population. Thus, the term 'witch' could be applied to figures more commonly known as cunning folk, individuals who dealt professionally or semi-professionally in healing, in finding lost property, and in helping to lift curses placed by malevolent witches (on the subject of which see Davies 2003). This new meaning came to particular prominence in popular culture. When American writer L. Frank Baum (1856–1919) published his successful children's book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900, he portrayed a fictional universe containing both Good Witches of the North and South, and Wicked Witches of the East and West (Baum 1900). Witches who are benevolent or morally ambiguous have since become a staple of fantasy fiction, promoted through the writings of Terry Pratchett (1948–2015), Philip Pullman (b. 1946), and J. K. Rowling (b. 1965). Once introduced into the cultural lexicon, this use of the term 'witch' would have major repercussions, opening up the possibility for increasing numbers of people to claim the identity for themselves and to reshape it for their own purposes.

Deriving from the typical European portrayal of malevolent witches as female, the third understanding of ‘witch’ describes a woman who is rebellious, strong-willed, anti-social, or otherwise independent of male domination. Gaining particular traction in the twentieth century, this use of the term has often been thrown at women in a derogatory and sometimes misogynistic fashion. Thus, amid her unsuccessful campaign to win the 2016 US presidential election, Hillary Clinton (b. 1947) was repeatedly cast as ‘the Wicked Witch of the Left’ by her critics. Three years prior, opponents of former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013) campaigned to get the song ‘Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead’ to the top of the pop charts following the announcement of her death. At the same time, this highly gendered use of ‘witch’ could also be embraced as an expressly feminist statement. As shall be highlighted later in this Element, various feminist activists have openly declared themselves to be witches and emphasised their sympathy for the victims of the early modern witch trials – even to the extent of campaigning to have these victims memorialised near their places of execution.

The fourth and final definition of the word ‘witch’ is that which concerns us most here. It encompasses those I call *modern religious witches*, people who adopt the identity of the witch for themselves in reference to their own ritual practices and spiritual beliefs. This term refers not to a single phenomenon but to a cluster of different traditions, most of which can be considered new religious movements as well as forms of esotericism and occultism. These new religions have almost entirely arisen within Western countries, especially those in the Anglosphere, since the early part of the twentieth century. As pointed out by Brian P. Levack, a historian specialising in the early modern witch trials, modern Western witchcrafts are ‘qualitatively different from the witchcraft that was actually practised ... in the past’ (Levack 2016: 267). Indeed, prior to the twentieth century it seems that very few people would have wanted to consider themselves a witch; the label of ‘witch’ was almost always an accusation made against other people, one that could have very serious repercussions. That ‘witch’ has become a term people embrace for themselves illustrates the extent of the sociocultural transformations that Western societies have undergone since the seventeenth century.

By far the largest and best known of these modern witchcraft religions is Wicca, a modern Pagan tradition that came to public attention in England during the 1950s, largely thanks to the efforts of the English ‘Father of Wicca’ Gerald Gardner (1884–1964). He and other early Wiccans claimed that they were practitioners of a religion that stretched back deep into the pre-Christian past, adding that it was the adherents of this tradition who had been persecuted in the early modern witch trials. Wicca soon spread abroad, forming what Hutton has

termed ‘the first fully formed religion which England has given the world’ (Hutton 2019: vii). However, Wicca was not the only group embracing the identity of the witch in this period. In 1928, a few Oxford University students briefly played at being witches (Wheeler 2018), and it is quite possible that other small witchcraft groups emerged in the first half of the twentieth century but left little or no trace in the historical record. From the 1960s, there were also various British esotericists who insisted that it was they, rather than Gardner’s Wiccans, who were the true inheritors of historical witchcraft traditions. The best known of these was Robert Cochrane (1931–1966), who operated a group to the west of London in the early to mid-part of that decade. Cochrane’s writings posthumously circulated in a milieu whose practitioners increasingly labelled themselves ‘traditional witches’, a designation that became particularly popular from the 1990s (Doyle White 2018a). Some of these traditional witches, such as the Essex-based Andrew D. Chumley (1967–2004), practised Luciferian traditions (on which see Gregorius 2013), while others pursued forms of traditional witchcraft that were effectively types of eclectic Wicca.

Esotericists in the United States also took an interest in witchcraft. Jack Parsons (1914–1952), the California-based rocket scientist committed to the new religion of Thelema, established a group he called The Witchcraft in 1950 (Hedenborg White 2019). The imagery of early modern witchcraft was also absorbed into LaVeyan Satanism, a new religion established by another California occultist, Anton LaVey (1930–1997), through the formation of his Church of Satan in 1966 (Introvigne 2016: 299–328; Laycock 2023). Meanwhile, the 1960s saw Wicca spread rapidly through the United States, where the influence of social movements like second-wave feminism resulted in the formation of a varied range of different Wiccan traditions (Clifton 2006). During the 1990s, growing Wiccan influence on popular depictions of witchcraft, especially television series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*, fuelled the rise of a teenage Wiccan subculture (Berger and Ezzy 2007; Johnston and Aloï 2007), while the 2010s saw interest in witchcraft again spike among young people, this time driven heavily by social media outlets like TikTok and Instagram (Orrell 2019; Miller 2022). The 2010s also saw growing utilisation of the term ‘witch’, alongside the Spanish synonym *bruja*, among Black Americans practising certain African diasporic religions.

Although a growing body of scholarship on these modern witchcraft religions has appeared, especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, in general there has been little comparative analysis between them. Among the groups discussed here, Wicca and LaVeyan Satanism have attracted the most attention, but rarely, if ever, have scholars considered them in tandem. This may be owing in part to a tendency among modern Pagans (and some of the scholars who

research them) to try to distance themselves from Satanism (Doyle White 2018b: 142–3). This, in turn, is often tied in with conflicts over the identity of the witch, as practitioners of different new religions insist that they legitimately use the term, while their rivals are mere pretenders. One prominent American Wiccan writer, for instance, related that ‘many Satanists call themselves Witches, even though they are not’ (Grimassi 2000: 252). A common claim among Wiccans is that Satanists are merely ‘reverse Christians’, for they draw the figure of Satan from Christian mythology rather than turning to altogether non-Christian sources of inspiration (for instance Starhawk 1987: 7, 345). Conversely, Satanists have thrown this accusation back at Wiccans. LaVey referred to Wiccans disparagingly as ‘pseudo-Christian groups’ who ‘base seventy-five per cent of their philosophy on the trite and hackneyed tenets of Christianity’ (LaVey 2005: 51). Perhaps because they compete for control over the same images, iconography, and identity, there is often little love lost between different forms of modern religious witchcraft.

The New Witches of the West seeks to explore these varied new religions in tandem, emphasising the commonalities that can be seen across them, rather than the differences that they often wish to emphasise. In doing this, it pursues a particular theme: what is it about the idea of witchcraft and the identity of the witch that appeals to people living in modern Western societies? It thus endeavours to offer new perspectives not only on the construction of new religions but also on the cultural history of witchcraft itself.

1 Tradition

Scholars have long recognised that one of the key ways in which new religions seek to legitimate their existence is by appealing to the power of the past. The patina of time lends a sense of authenticity to religion, rendering a particular belief or practice worthy of respect in the eyes of many observers. Scholars of religion can be just as prone to displaying this sort of sentiment as other people; academics attending conferences are not often observed laughing when presented with the teachings of Zoroastrianism and Judaism, and yet have been seen doing so when informed of the beliefs held by Scientologists (Thomas 2022) and Raëlians (Chryssides 2003: 45). Evidently, the perceived age of a religion has an impact on the extent to which many people will take it seriously.

The scholar of new religions James R. Lewis recognised this important point when he described the ‘appeal to tradition’ as being one of three main legitimisation strategies employed by new religious movements (Lewis 2003: 14). While the sources of tradition from which a new religion may draw can certainly vary, from notions of primordial wisdom to historical texts, they nevertheless all

illustrate that practitioners of new religions repeatedly feel that a link with the past is what makes their practice relevant in the present. This can operate on a personal, psychological level, but also on a broader sociological one, as a religious minority seeks wider influence, respect, or simply toleration.

Witchcraft is particularly pertinent on this count because it offers the potential for an appeal to the past par excellence. Indeed, there are few concepts in the Western cultural imagination that so readily evoke an association with bygone eras. One can see this attitude, for example, in various British novels from the early to mid-twentieth century. Gerald Gardner introduced his 1949 novel *High Magic's Aid* with the statement 'Witchcraft! Stuff and nonsense. No one believes in such things nowadays' (Gardner 1999: 9). Similarly, in his 1934 novel *The Devil Rides Out*, Dennis Wheatley (1897–1977) had one of his characters declare that they do not believe in witchcraft because 'nobody does in these days' (Wheatley 1970: 29). In the 1930 detective novel *The Secret of High Eldersham* by Miles Burton (a pen name of Cecil Street, 1884–1964), one character announces that 'the witch-cult, in this country at any rate, is supposed to have ceased centuries ago' (Burton 2016: 80), while Agatha Christie's (1890–1976) 1961 novel *The Pale Horse* featured the statement 'there aren't any witches nowadays' (Christie 1990: 43). Witchcraft, and a belief in witchcraft, was repeatedly presented as a thing of the past, at least in those parts of the world where modern religious witches first appeared.

Arguably, this sense of the essential 'pastness' of witchery is not something intrinsic to it as a topic, but instead reflects the way in which discourses about witchcraft have been shaped in modern Western societies. As historian Jan Machielsen (2021: 1–4) has pointed out, the notion that a belief in witchcraft fundamentally belongs to the past was something that scholars writing on the subject deliberately promoted from the eighteenth century onwards, even when that meant overlooking the continued perpetuation of said beliefs. In turn, this view of witchcraft can be seen as just one facet of the broader discourse about the so-called disenchantment of modernity, through which European and European colonial elites sought to consign what they called 'magical' and 'superstitious' beliefs and practices to history by presenting them as fundamentally pre-modern (on which see Josephson-Storm 2017). In this social context, to believe in witchcraft became an increasingly stigmatised position in many European communities. Thus, from at least the nineteenth century onwards it would be common for people to insist that while their forebears had believed in witchcraft, they themselves did not – even if, on further investigation, it sometimes turned out that their professed disbelief was not always sincere (for instance Favret-Saada 1980: 16; Mencej 2017: 40).

For those founders of new religions who, in the twentieth century, declared themselves witches, it was witchcraft's sense of pastness that allowed them to portray themselves as the inheritors of a genuinely historic tradition. Witchcraft also offered the advantage of being a subject about which there was still a considerable aura of mystery, a mystery that would allow for different interpretations as to its historical nature among modern religious witches. The dominant scholarly understanding of European witchcraft throughout the nineteenth century, and up to the middle of the twentieth, had been what later historians have termed the Rationalist school of thought (Monter 1972: 435–6; Fudge 2006: 490). This approach regarded historical European belief in witchcraft as a delusion and often argued that ecclesial authorities had exploited this belief to cement their own power and dominance. Arising in contrast to this interpretation was the Romantic school, the adherents of which believed that a religion of witches had really existed in late medieval and early modern Europe. This school of thought nevertheless broke down into factions, some deeming these historical witches to have been Satanists and others regarding them as representatives of a surviving pre-Christian religion. Unsurprisingly, given their belief in the historical reality of a witchcraft religion, it was the perspectives of these Romantic scholars that would ultimately prepare the ground for the emergence of modern religious witchcraft.

The Emergence of Wicca

Of the various new religions that claim the identity of the witch, none is better known than Wicca. Indeed, the number of Wiccans is now in the hundreds of thousands (Doyle White 2016a: 164–6), meaning that they probably represent the single largest group of self-described witches in the world today. Wicca is unusual among new religions in that, to a significant extent, it represents an outgrowth of an idea originally advanced by historians and other scholars. The idea in question was that the people accused and often executed during the early modern witch trials had been neither committed Devil worshippers nor innocents caught up in the delusions of their persecutors; rather, they had been members of a surviving pre-Christian religious tradition devoted to the worship of a horned god.

As historian Norman Cohn (1975: 103–4) highlighted, the origins of this theory can be traced to Karl Ernst Jarcke (1801–1852), a professor of criminal law at the University of Berlin. In 1828 Jarcke added his own comments to the records of a seventeenth-century German witch trial that he was editing for publication. There, he suggested that the early modern witches had been adherents of a real Devil-worshipping religion, but that it had originated as a pre-Christian Germanic tradition that had morphed into Satanism only after being