A witch is someone who practices witchcraft, an alleged magical or supernatural power. Witches are found in the history, mythology, and anthropology of nearly every society, and their practices vary widely. The term witch can have a negative or positive connotation depending on the culture. For example, most post-Christian European cultures have associated witches with evil, but other cultures view witches in cooperation with divine forces. Although the term witch is gender neutral, and applies to both men and women, over the centuries Western societies have associated magical powers primarily with women. This entry discusses the origins of witches, punishments for witches in European societies, and modern witches.

Origins of Witches

Since the inception of ancient societies, people related the bewildering power of nature with gods and goddesses, whom they believed had control over the earth. Humans worshipped deities such as the Mother Goddess, which was known as Astarte in Syria, Ceres in Rome, Cybele in Phrygia, Ishtar in Babylon, Demeter in Greece, and Isis in Egypt. Ancient societies held festivals to celebrate the prowess of their gods and goddesses. However, despite the revelry, gods and goddesses also proved to be unpredictable, causing famine, plague, drought, and a bevy of other problems. Human beings lamented that the gods and goddesses were not something that they could always control. To stop the chaos humans believed the gods and goddesses caused, exceptional men and women emerged in every culture to intervene. Medicine people, shamans, sorcerers, and witches invoked spells and led rituals to influence the powers that they felt controlled their world. Witches were thus often believed to be intermediaries between the spirit realm of gods and goddesses and the human realm.

In societies throughout the world, witches also worked their magic on ordinary people through their communication with spirits. Using herbs, plants, and flowers, witches invented concoctions that healed a variety of illnesses. Witches performed rituals to help cows' milk flow and rain to fall to save farmers' crops, and recited enigmatic incantations that were meant to harm an enemy's home. Numerous midwives were also known as witches and vice versa. In many societies, successfully helping a mother through childbirth meant that a witch had called on the powers of the supernatural. If the mother or child did not survive, sometimes the midwife-witch would be blamed for using her evil powers. Because of their perceived power to cause famine and plague and harm farm animals and people, witches (who usually lived in isolation) were both feared and honored in the communities in which they lived. This fear led to many gendered superstitions about witches—that they were ugly and old, kept demons in the form of farm animals, and could fly.

Furthermore, as societies shifted from open fields and land to more clustered, populated communities, the roles of women changed. Increasingly, women were considered mentally, physically, and spiritually inferior to their male counterparts. Thus, with their alleged great power to destroy or create health and prosperity, witches became increasingly threatening to male dominance. The rise of Christianity and the devaluation of feminine deities also contributed to the perception of women as spiritually inferior to...
Punishment for Witches in European Societies

In most ancient societies, “evil” acts of witches or “maleficia” were punished. Before the Middle Ages, “evil” magic was punished usually by fines, banishment, and sometimes imprisonment. Roman law tolerated beneficial or positive magic that helped with healing. However, once Christianity spread throughout Europe, pre-Christian gods and goddesses were denounced or replaced with saints. The church was split on how to view witchcraft—some contended that witchcraft was mere superstition, but others saw it as heresy inspired by the devil. During the Early Middle Ages, church laws, more concerned with attacking gods and goddesses, were essentially lenient toward witches and did not conduct witch trials. Furthermore, despite the required conversion to Christianity in most European countries, remnants of gods and goddess worship as well as magic spells and rituals remained.

However, by the 11th century, the church ended its leniency toward witchcraft and pagan beliefs and condemned heretics to death by burning. Citing biblical passages such as Exodus 22:18, which states, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” the church supported the death sentence for those who were perceived as witches. Connections between witches and the devil were further strengthened by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) who claimed that witches were lustful women who had sexual intercourse with demons, could shape shift, and flew through the night skies. Most frighteningly, according to Aquinas, witches were only able to perform their magic through the help of demons.

During the mid-15th century, witch hunts were a cultural phenomenon in Europe and contained all of the classic traits of mass hysteria. Often, only mere accusation was enough to get one branded as a witch, and the “witch” was tried in court and sentenced to be burned alive at the stake. The paranoid and untrue notion that witches were everywhere was furthered by two Dominican inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger who published *Malleus Maleficarum*, often translated as “Hammer of Witches” in 1486. The book was first published in Germany, the European country that had persecuted the most witches throughout the centuries. Soon after the book was published, it was translated into nearly every European language and was second in sales only to the Bible between 1487 and 1669.

*Malleus Maleficarum* was the most exhaustive and famous witch hunter’s guidebook. Previously, the pope had implicated both men and women for practicing witchcraft, but *Malleus Maleficarum* emphasized that magical powers were most preeminent in women. Though witchcraft had always been a gendered phenomenon, Kramer and Sprenger’s book claimed that women were primarily “addicted to evil superstition.” The book also contended that women were intellectually like children, more likely to waver in their faith, had insatiable carnal lust, were feeble in mind and body than men, more credulous, and more likely to lie. *Malleus Maleficarum* also advised how to get a witch to confess and how to perceive a witch’s behavior during her trial. For instance, according to Kramer and Sprenger, if an accused witch did not cry during her trial, she should automatically be perceived as guilty.

There is no accurate number of how many people, mostly women, were burned at the stake by both Protestants and Catholics in Europe and America between 1450 and 1700, the height of the Spanish Inquisition. There were many gendered reasons for the large numbers of accused women during the years of the witch hunts. Few of the accused witches were ever verifiably discovered to be witches, but all had similar character traits—they were threatening to the traditional gender order. In Europe, most of the accused and convicted were older women, midwives, outcasts from society, adulterers, Jews, and Gypsies.

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Between 1620 and 1725, Puritans in New England waged an investigation against thousands of women, most of whom violated traditional gender roles. Signs of female independence were enough to incite townspeople to accuse women of witchcraft. Most of the women accused of witchcraft in New England had no brothers or sons and were likely to inherit or already had inherited property. These women were frequently accused of witchcraft by male family members who felt slighted by their inheritance. Many women who were accused of witchcraft were also believed to have committed fornication, adultery, or infanticide. Thus, the fear of women's sexual and economic independence also inspired the witch trials in New England society.

By the 1700s, the power of Puritanism had declined and notions of womanhood shifted from the possibility of witches’ insatiable lust and consorting with the devil to women as essentially passive and chaste.

**Modern Witches**

Witches are represented in modern Western societies similarly to how they have been presented for hundreds of years—often as women to fear, but sometimes as women to revere for their magical powers. However, one modern societal representation is different than previous centuries’ mass hysteria concerning witch hunts: witches are sometimes represented in pop culture as comical or silly. In the 20th century, several songs emerged about witches ranging from the stereotype of the scheming witch—such as Santana’s “Black Magic Woman,” Donovan’s “Season of the Witch,” and “Ding Dong the Witch Is Dead” from the *Wizard of Oz*—to awe of the witches’ influence—such as the Eagle’s “Witchy Woman” and the Steve Miller Band’s “Abracadabra”—to the silly, such as the song “Witchdoctor.” Films such as the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) featured a common gendered dichotomy of witches and women—the “good” witch and the “wicked” witch, who must be punished. The television show *Bewitched* helped contest the stereotype that all witches were ugly, old, and used their powers for evil. Instead, *Bewitched* featured a witch who was beautiful and consistently using her powers for good, often with comical results.

The horror film *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) coincided with a societal resurgence of interest in neo-pagan witchcraft or Wicca and reinforced a plethora of stereotypes about witches. The rise of Wicca, a religion that claims to have roots in pre-Christian paganism in Europe, was popularized in 1954 by Gerald Gardner after the British Witchcraft Act was finally repealed in 1951. Wiccans, both male and female, refer to themselves as witches, believe in gods and goddesses, practice rituals, and live by a distinct code of ethics. Some Wiccan women form women-only covens, or are Dianic witches who only worship the goddess. In the 1970s, Z. Budapest, a Hungarian witch, formed the Susan B. Anthony Coven Number I, the first feminist witches coven. Hundreds of feminist-inspired, women-only covens followed, and groups of Wiccan women proudly proclaimed themselves as witches.

In the past 20 years, the fastest growing religion in the United States by percentage is Wicca. The number of Wicca adherents jumped from 8,000 in 1990 to 134,000 in 2001. In Canada, Wicca members increased 281 percent from 1990 to 1991. Three times as many women (71 percent) as men still convert to Wicca.

**Conclusion**

The role of witches in society has changed drastically throughout the centuries. Though gendered from their inception, in ancient societies, witches were often revered for the integral part they played as intermediaries between gods and goddesses and humans. Fear of women’s power led to superstition
and suspicion of witches that culminated in Europe and America between 1450 and 1700. Thousands of women were burned at the stake for their nonconformity and threat to the economic and sexual order of Western societies. Currently, the resurgence in interest in witchcraft has culminated in the large numbers of, mostly female, converts to the religion known as Wicca.

See also
Buffy the Vampire Slayer; Christianity, Status of Women in; Deities, Gender Images and; Divine Feminine Spirituality; Gender Stereotypes; Midwifery; Religion, Gender Roles in; Wicca

Further Readings

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